

Encourage One Another
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Now, brothers and sisters, about times and dates we do not need to write to you, for you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. While people are saying, "Peace and safety," destruction will come on them suddenly, as labor pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape. But you, brothers and sisters, are not in darkness so that this day should surprise you like a thief. You are all children of the light and children of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness. So then, let us not be like others, who are asleep, but let us be awake and sober. For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, get drunk at night. But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet. For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him. Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing. - 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11, NIV

Last week we talked about the second coming of Christ, when Christ will return. We read from one of Paul's letter to the early church. We said first of all that no one knows when that second coming will take place, not even Jesus himself, so idle speculation about when that will happen simply doesn't make sense. But in the meantime, Paul urged those in the early church to live each day as if Jesus were coming back soon. That means loving one another because God loved us first and showed us how to love one another through Jesus. Today's passage is from the same letter of Paul that we read last week.

A few years back I went on sabbatical and reached out to a number of individuals whom I hoped to meet and talk with face to face. I ended up actually meeting with the author Barbara Brown Taylor, who lives in North Georgia; Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann who now lives in Ohio; former preaching professor Tom Long who lives on the Maryland Eastern Shore; and Eugene Peterson, a Presbyterian minister and professor, and the author of many books including *The Message* translation of the Bible.

In retrospect, I think the main reason I wanted to reach out to them could be summed up in the word *encouragement*. I think we all need encouragement from time to time. But not only was I looking for encouragement, I wanted to thank each of them for what they had meant to me over the years and I wanted to encourage them. Eugene Peterson died not too long after I visited with him, and after his death many wrote about how significant he had been in their lives. One person put it this way:

Years later Eugene befriended me. He had recently retired to Montana. I was a young aspiring pastor, and he took me on, inviting me into a mentoring relationship through letters, conversations, books, and pilgrimages to Flathead Lake. This invitation changed my life and my ministry. . . . Eugene gave me a vision and a language for who I could be as a pastor. He restored honor and dignity to the calling of the pastor. Eugene revived a vision of a pastor as someone serious, intelligent, savvy, creative, playful, and prophetic.

Eugene encouraged those in ministry to resist the seductive sirens of the pragmatic pastor, in favor of a ministry animated by the patient and cruciform witness of a long obedience in the same direction. (Trygve Johnson Hinga-Boersma, Dean of the Chapel at Hope College)

Each of the individuals I visited had encouraged me, but each encouraged in his or her own way -- which I think is the nature of encouragement. For example, when we think of encouragers, my guess is most of us think of somebody who is like a cheerleader, who constantly seems to be able to affirm almost everyone he or she meets. Dr. Tom Tewel, who has preached here for the dedication of our new buildings and who has led our men's retreat, is one of the best I know at encouraging in this way. I don't know if it was his personality, his upbringing, or something he learned along the way, but Tom is a great encourager.

But that is not the only way to encourage. I think some of us encourage by being a teacher or mentor like Eugene Petersen – someone who not only gives positive reinforcement, but who is able to challenge us in ways that also encourage us. A few years ago, I remember watching on TV the championship game of the Final Four, the year Louisville won it all. After the game they were standing on the podium receiving their trophy when the announcer on the podium asked Peyton Siva, the star Louisville point guard, about what all of this meant to him. The first words he spoke were about thanking his savior Jesus Christ. When I heard those words from one of sport's newest heroes, I was reminded of what an announcer had said earlier about why Siva wore the number "3" on his basketball uniform. It was because of his Christian faith in God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit – the trinity. That's why he wears "3" on his jersey.

Later, I went back to look more closely at Siva's life. In a *USA Today* article (12/28/2012, "Peyton Siva Brings Blessings, Not Burdens to Louisville") it tells about Siva growing up in Seattle. His mother divorced his father when Siva was six months old because of the father's many problems. His Mom enrolled in college, often bringing little Siva with her to class – which not everyone appreciated – but it was all she could do. She got her degree, and today Siva calls her his "biggest role model in life." As Siva grew up, he started playing basketball. He knew he did not want to go the way of drugs, addiction, and prison that other members of his family followed.

Along the way he came across Danny Cage – the youth pastor Siva credits for his spiritual life. Cage reached out to Siva, and now they are so close that Siva gets a daily text message and Bible verse from his former youth pastor. During their time together, Siva asked Cage to come to one of his games. After the game he asked Cage, "How'd I play?" In a game where Siva scored 35 points with bunches of assists and rebounds, Cage said, "You really didn't play too well." Siva asked why. Cage talked about his attitude and the faces Siva made when the referee made a call that would go against him – how it affected Siva for a while. He told Siva that as the point guard, he was the leader of the team, and that when he had those breakdowns, it affected the whole team. He said to Siva, "Everybody can praise you for basketball, but my job will be to help develop you as a man." His coach, Rick Pitino, called Siva one of the top three players he has ever coached in college or the pros. So, when it comes to encouragers for Peyton Siva, it would probably be Jesus, his Mom, and then his youth pastor -- Danny Cage. Sometimes encouragers are able to help us grow by teaching us what we need to work on.

But sometimes, we don't need someone to tell us what we need to work on. Mainly we just need someone who will be there with us on our journey – maybe even listening more than speaking. Bill Bolling, the Founder and Director of the Atlanta Food Bank, told some of us pastors the story of a woman with young children who came to his office in a downtown church for some help. He had bus tokens to give her and had arranged for the woman and her kids to have a room in a hotel. He even talked with her about finding her a job. But at one point the woman pulled up a chair, sat right across from him at his desk, pointed her finger at him and said, “You don't get it, do you?” Bill said he was confused because he was helping her every way he knew how. It was then that she said this: “What I need is someone to be with me and not just give me things.” Bill said he will never forget it because he realized that part of his job was not just to give people things, but to be with them. Sometimes the best way to encourage someone is simply to be with them on this journey of faith.

Whatever way we encourage one another, when we do that well, God is using us to encourage others the same way that God encourages each one of us. And when we are present for others in that way, we re-present and incarnate Christ to others. God uses our voice and our actions to encourage others.

A while back, Mark Thompson, a pastor, suffered terrible knife wounds from an assailant in his home. One of the many consequences of his difficult recovery was being forced to miss watching his son Chris run in the state cross-country championship meet. So, Thompson commissioned his brother, Merv, to go in his place instead. According to the account in the *St. Paul Pioneer Press & Dispatch*, Mark told his brother, “I can't be there to see Chris run. So, I want you there at the beginning of the race. Holler a lot. . . . Then at the end, I want you to really cheer loudly. And I want you to make your voice sound like mine.” Merv heeded the advice and Chris ran a strong race, finishing second. Merv, also a pastor, discerned the theological truth in the story. “That's what Jesus wants us to do.” he said. “Make your voice sound like mine.” (*Leadership*, Vol. 10, no. 3.) I think that is what happens when we encounter encouragers -- they make their voices and their lives sound and look like Jesus, and it helps us run and finish our race of faith.

While this something often takes intentionality on our part to be encouragers the best way we know how, sometimes God uses us to encourage others even when we don't realize we are doing it. We are just living each day of our lives the way Jesus taught us to, and yet God can always use what we say or do to build up and encourage others – as Paul talks about in his letter. (1 Thessalonians 5:11, NIV)

A few years ago, I went with the youth group of another church up to Montreat, North Carolina for the Youth Conference. It was a great week. Rodger Nishioka was the preacher, and he was great. Rodger was a seminary professor at the time and probably the expert on youth ministry in the mainline churches today. He has spoken here a few times and he is one of my favorite preachers.

One night, he preached on a passage from 1 Samuel and he told the story of a member of his church when Rodger was growing up. Rodger is Japanese American, and his father was pastor of their Presbyterian Church. All of the Japanese churches played in a volleyball league – the

Presbyterians, the Methodists, the Baptists, and even the Buddhists. Rodger said that, in spite of what you might think, the Buddhists were mean volleyball players. They were good and everyone wanted to beat the Buddhists. He said it was like your faith was on the line or something. Rodger's church had four volleyball teams; three were really bad and one was really good. Their hope to beat the Buddhists lay with the church's really good team.

During one game, one of their players, a 44-year-old orthodontist and an elder in the church went up to spike the ball at the Buddhists. Rodger's dad liked this guy because he was what Rodger's dad called "a 'yes' elder." His Dad said that God had blessed him with twelve elders. Ten were "no elders" and two were "yes elders." When his Dad would propose some new idea, the elders would vote "no, no . . . yes, yes." Sometimes his dad prayed for more "yes elders," but he got what God gave him. This volleyball player was a "yes elder." He went up to spike the ball, came down, had a heart attack and died. He was forty-four, married, and had three young children.

This elder's death really shook up the church. He was the first member of Rodger's dad's generation to die. Six days after his death, they had the service there at the church. It was packed. Rodger's dad had a hard time getting through the service because he really liked this man. The tradition of the Asian community was for everyone to come forward at the end of the service to pay their respects to the person who had died – it was an open casket.

Right before this happened, Marilyn, the widow of the man who had died, came up front and stood there, holding her kids' hands. She thanked everyone for coming. But then she said there was a song, a praise song her husband had recently heard on the Christian radio station, and she thought it would be great if everyone could sing it. So, she began lining out the song. If I could, I would sing it for you, but the lyrics went like this:

How lovely on the mountains are the feet of him
Who brings good news, good news:
Announcing peace,
Proclaiming news of happiness.
Our God reigns, our God reigns!

It is from Isaiah. Rodger said he was seventeen years old and was sitting on the back pew watching all of this. After she sang this song, he found himself thinking, "Lady, you're a widow. Your husband died six days ago. You have three young kids. How do you have the audacity to stand in front of everyone here and sing, 'Our God Reigns'?" Rodger said he'd been through confirmation and Vacation Bible School. He was a preacher's kid, he was there every Sunday, often the first to come and the last to go—which he often resented. But as he saw Marilyn, this widow, standing there, he remembered clearly thinking to himself that he didn't have the faith of that widow standing up there and that he was going to spend his whole life trying to get it – all because Marilyn stood up and sang "Our God Reigns."

Rodger said that from time to time he goes back to visit his father's church. Marilyn still attends. He always finds her, and she asks Rodger if he has finished his doctorate and he tells her he has. She asks if he is still teaching at that school and he says, "Yes, Marilyn." And she says, "We are so proud of you!" And Rodger says that he follows her around the church and says, "Marilyn, you know why I am doing this, don't you?" And she says, "Oh, Rodger, we are so proud of you."

And he follows her some more and says, “Marilyn, you know why I am doing this, don’t you?” And she says, “We are so proud of you.” Rodger says, “Marilyn, I am doing this because at that service you stood up and sang ‘Our God Reigns.’ That’s why I am doing this.” Marilyn says, “We are so proud of you.” And Rodger says, “I am proud of you, too, Marilyn.”

Friends, that is what mutual encouragement looks like. It is how we build up one another in Christ. So. may God use each one of us to encourage others in our own, unique way.

In the strong name of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.