

Relationship: Encouragement

Have you ever tried to build something? When I was a fair bit younger than I am now, I liked building model airplanes, glueing the pieces together and adding decals and some paint to the finished product. Many years later, I had the chance to help oversee the building of our house, including finding a basic plan, making all the changes we wanted, hiring a contractor and doing some of the subcontracting myself. It was a great process, one I enjoyed at the time.

But more interesting, and more free-lanced, was the building of a fort in our back yard. Our boys were just 6 and 4 when we first moved in to Maple Ridge and so I bought a kit from Lumberland, I think it was called then, and assembled a little climbing fort, with swings and monkey bars and a place for a slide. It served its purpose for a little while, but then the boys got some vision for adding on, building higher, enclosing the portion at the back, getting windows and a door, putting roofing on, adding in a little kitchen area where they could heat a can of soup over tea lights. I remember going down to a cedar siding place on River Road and taking the boys in to negotiate a price on cedar siding for their creation, and the lady giving them a far better deal than I could have gotten, once she was told what they had in mind. I don't think anyone ever slept in that fort, although some raccoons made it a stopover spot for awhile, but the joy of building, of creating, of expanding the dream, was worth all the efforts we put into it over a couple of summers, and Sarah and I got a lot of joy out of tearing it all down after a few years of weathering had made it look pretty dismal.

Building something can be very satisfying, especially if we do it well and if it's something that has value and keeps that value over a long period of time. And that's what we're asked to do as members of the body of Christ. Only we're not asked to build a house or something we can cut and paste on our own. We're asked to build people, to lift up others, for the sake of the whole body of Christ.

We'll look at a number of Scriptures that support the idea of us being builders of people, but the key one that I want to start with is 1 Thessalonians 5:11. The context for this verse is an extended teaching on the Lord's return and the need for us to be always ready and vigilant as we wait for that return. Paul calls believers in Thessalonika -- and in Maple Ridge -- to walk in the light, to live uprightly, because that's who we are, children of light, and we have to be able to stand in the growing darkness around us. I'll read, starting in v. 8:

But let us who live in the light think clearly, protected by the body armor of faith and love, and wearing as our helmet the confidence of our salvation. For God decided to save us through our Lord Jesus Christ, not to pour out His anger on us. He died for us so that we can live with Him forever, whether we are dead or alive at the time of His return. So encourage each other and build each other up, just as you are already doing.

“Encourage each other and build each other up.” This is the way we help the church move forward in the world, not by mercilessly criticizing one another for our failures, but

through looking for and finding, reasons for hope, for encouragement, for a positive outlook on how we will face the future. The world is tearing us down, pulling us constantly into the temptation to abandon faith, to give up on morality, on ethical living and ridiculing us for our belief in a loving, saving God. Why on earth would we want to join the world in tearing something down that our Lord wants us to build up and make stronger? Why weaken those who might someday strengthen us?

In the passage we just read, there is a foundation for encouragement that is laid out for us: God has chosen to save us rather than to pour out His anger on us and so Jesus has died for us so that we can live with Him forever. The foundation on which we build is nothing more, and certainly nothing less, than the redeeming sacrifice that Jesus made for us on the cross of Calvary. Because of what God has done for us, we have a reason for hope and a belief in a better future, and we use that knowledge, that faith, as a basis for building up the body of Christ.

Have you ever built anything, like a shed or a smaller building, without a proper foundation? Have you tried to sink some 4 x 4's into the ground in the hopes that they will provide the stability for whatever you're building on top? They probably will for awhile, and then the rot starts and the structure leans and, eventually, the thing has to be replaced. The foundation is critically important - and especially when we look at what our Christian life will be marked by.

Here's an illustration -- it's just an illustration, mind you, so don't take offense. If the foundation for your life in the body is the structure of the church, how organized it all is, whether or not it starts on time, the flow of the service, the multitude of the programs and the efficiency with which those programs are run, you'd be in trouble here, wouldn't you! If you look around at people and see labels like "late again" or "too loud" or "disorganized", you will have a hard time finding peace, a hard time feeling positively about your experience. You'll always be irritated by the people around you and you'll find that a barrier to loving them. But if you see each person that comes through the door as someone who is so loved by Jesus that He gave His life for her, for him, then your experience of church life becomes much more positive.

There are lots of things we can encourage each other about - but this is the foundational one, so I want to hit it hard today. You can appreciate the things "above ground", someone serving you coffee, or leading worship or helping clean up after the service, and acknowledge the people who do those things. That's one way of building or strengthening the church. But until we choose to see each other as brothers and sisters, standing with us at the foot of the cross, fully accepted by Jesus as part of His forever family and united with us in His cause on this earth, we're building on a shaky foundation. What will you say to the person who isn't around to help clean up because they have other commitments, or who has a bad back and can't stack chairs or whose kids need to get lunch or they'll go wild? Our text says, "Encourage each other and build each other up", to which I would add, "on the foundation of love and acceptance that we believe Jesus offers all who come to Him in faith."

Another verse from 1 Thessalonians provides us with some further foundational material upon which to build each other up, and this is the hope that we have for a life that will be lived in the presence of our Lord and which will last forever. Chapter 4 describes the return of Christ and the resurrection of those who have died and then says this:

Then, together with them, we who are still alive and remain on the earth will be caught up in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air and remain with Him forever. So comfort and encourage each other with these words. (4:17,18)

I want to read a fairly lengthy quotation from C.S. Lewis' work called "The Weight of Glory" which I think should help us see one another in a new and more helpful light, and help us know how to encourage or build one another.

"It is a serious thing ... to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship ... It is in the light of these overwhelming possibilities, it is with awe ... that we should conduct all our dealings with one another, all friendships, all loves, all play, all politics. There are no 'ordinary people'. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilizations -- these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub and exploit ... Our merriment must be of that kind ... which exists between people who have, from the outset, taken each other seriously -- no flippancy, no superiority, no presumption.

I've left out chunks because it is a pretty heavy concept and I don't want us to lose the main thrust: the people we share coffee with on a Sunday morning, or that we have discussions with in small groups after the sermon, or that we just see sitting across the room and aren't sure what their names are - these are not creatures to treat lightly, to take for granted. These are beings who are made in God's image, who will reign with Christ Jesus in eternity and who have been paid for with the blood of God's only Son. These are amazing creatures -- and God's desire for us, in relation to these amazing creatures, is that we would encourage them and build them up, helping them to fulfill the purposes for which God has called them out of darkness and into His marvelous light.

Let's move on to the writer of the book of Hebrews and I'll read Hebrews 3:13:

Encourage one another daily, as long as it is called 'today', so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness.

That sounds like encouragement in discouraging circumstances, doesn't it? What is the writer talking about in referring to being "hardened by sin's deceitfulness"? Let's look at the context. In the earlier verses of chapter 3, the writer says that we shouldn't be like Israel was in the wilderness when they rebelled against God. God was angry at them because they turned their hearts away from Him and chose to live in rebellion. Verse 11:

So in My anger I made a vow: "They will never enter My place of rest."

That's the end of a quotation of Psalm 95:7-11 and the writer of Hebrews goes on from there (vv. 12,13):

Be careful then, dear friends, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But encourage one another daily, as long as it is still called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness.

So the context is of people who stop believing in God, who rebel against Him and choose to go their own way, to abandon His purposes for their lives. The verse that follows makes it even more clear:

We have come to share in Christ if we hold firmly till the end the confidence we had at first. (v.14)

This is a recognition that there is a lot going on around us that undermines faith. There are life circumstances, there are the temptations of the evil one, there are the doubts and fears that come against us. It's not a bold proclamation to say that life is hard or that most people wish that their life could quickly become easier to manage. In the midst of those challenges, we speak to one another words of faith and of truth. We encourage each other by praying for one another, by reminding one another that Jesus told us it would get like this. We find the embers of faith and hope that are still alive in those we love, and we fan them into flame.

Which leads us into the next passage from Hebrews, chapter 10, verses 24 and 25:

Think of ways to encourage one another to outbursts of love and good deeds. And let us not neglect our meeting together, as some people do, but encourage and warn each other, especially now that the day of His coming is drawing near.

There are two uses of the word "encourage" in these two verses. In the first, the encouragement is to "outbursts of love and good deeds." What would that look like? "Hey, Fred, I love what you did at the Seniors Centre last week ... and those people really seem to love you! Why don't we try to build a team around what you're doing so that others can catch a vision for it and so you don't get burned out. Maybe that way, we could do it more often." "Thanks, Anna, for making yourself available to drive people to their appointments or shopping, whatever; you know we actually do need more help with the refugee families, getting the kids to school and helping them get to language classes and the like. I'd like to give your name to the coordinator from the Community Church so they can call on you when there's a need." That's not big; it's just an encouragement to love and good deeds. It's an encouragement because you're appreciating what someone has done or offered to do and you're giving them more opportunity.

The second time the word "encourage" is used in this passage is in v. 25 and it's used side by side with the word "warn". "Encourage and warn each other, especially now that the day of His coming is drawing near." I don't think this needs to be taken apart in some technical way. We encourage people to remain faithful, to stay on course, to keep trusting Jesus. And we warn them not to give up, not to get discouraged, not to let bitterness or discouragement rob them of their growth.

Remember Jesus, in Luke 18, after telling the parable of the persistent widow, the woman who refused to give up in her search for justice, asked the question, "When the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on the earth?" That's an encouragement to press in and a warning of what happens when we get sloppy, when we stop going to church for a long season, when we tune out those who are encouraging us to stay faithful -- we lose our spiritual edge, and too many just give up. When Jesus returns He'll be looking for people who haven't given up, who've stayed the course, who've remained faithful and continue to trust Him, believe in His word, follow in His commandments. That's an encouragement and it is also a warning.

There are two passages, one in Ephesians and one in Colossians, which are quite similar and which give us yet another angle on how we can encourage each other.

"Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs ..." (Eph. 5:19)

"Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God." (Colossians 3:16)

The word "admonish" in Colossians means to correct, to warn, or to advise or teach. This is part of the process of maturing, in which we grow in wisdom by receiving counsel from others. If we get defensive or refuse to hear someone who is trying to help us, we don't mature, but if we walk in humility with each other, we'll continue to learn and grow. Notice the importance of the word of Christ in this process. As we feed our minds on Jesus' teaching, and allow His word to dwell in us richly, we will have the ability, the capacity, the knowledge, that will enable us to teach and admonish one another wisely.

And, finally, notice that the songs of worship that we sing; the psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, are directed both to God, who receives praise from us, and to one another, who receive the teaching that comes from the words we sing. We are built up, encouraged, by the act of worship. We sing words that declare the truth of God's love and faithfulness. We sing words that declare our response to that love. As we relate to God, we are in relationship with those around us and there is a strengthening effect from our worship.

Let's summarize and find our applications for today:

1. Part of our calling as Christians is to be builders in the body of Christ. Not demolition crews, but builders. Let's make the focus of our relationships how we can encourage and strengthen our sisters and brothers. Let's be thinking and acting in creative and positive ways to help one another to grow in faith and in the knowledge of the ways of the Lord. It begins with our mindset, our belief that God's Spirit is at work and we are wanting to cooperate with what He's doing.
2. As an aide in that process, to help us be positive in all our dealings with our brothers and sisters, I'd like us to search the Scriptures to see what our destiny is -- not just for our own sake, but to help us know where these people around us are heading. We will be helped to treat them well here on earth when we discover how well their Father will be treating them in the world to come.

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- 3.** When you see a brother or sister in trouble, not making good decisions, inviting disaster into their lives through foolish choices, be as creative and life-giving as you can possibly be in the way you warn that person of the danger they are in. We all have to deal with pride - some are better at it than others - but make it easy on the other person, and let them know that your warnings are coming from a loving heart.