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## Elevate Others: Encouragement

1 Thessalonians 4:18; 5:11; 1 Corinthians 1: 3-6

Good morning Chapel Hill! This is the last in our series, "Elevate Others." In a season, when it is so easy to turn inward, it seemed a good time to focus on lifting other people up! We've talked of the importance of humility, empathy, forgiveness and sacrifice. Today, I want to talk about one more essential quality: Encouragement. When was the last time you felt really encouraged by someone? When was the last time YOU really encouraged another person? Let's face it...when the word "pandemic" is floating around, it's easy to get dis-couraged, isn't it? To have courage sucked out of us! And some of what's going on out there doesn't exactly help.

I was in a grocery store the other day. The minute I walked through the doors, I recognized the opening bass line of this classic rock and roll tune. See who can be the first to name the song in chat. (PLAY opening of "Another One Bites the Dust") Are you chuckling yet? "Another One Bites the Dust." And it wasn't just playing in the background; that puppy was cranked up!

Another one bites the dust, and another one gone, and another one gone, another one bites the dust.

Somehow...it seemed incredibly inappropriate. I thought, "Surely, the manager will hear this and turn it off." Nope. In fact, if there is an extended version of this song, that's what was playing. I was standing in line for the cash register...and it was still playing. "Another one bites the dust..."

As I've said before, you've got to keep your sense of humor. But surely, that choice of background music... as we were pushing our carts around in a packed store... with our masks on... carefully avoiding each other as we grabbed our bananas...probably NOT too encouraging, would you agree?

By the end of this message, you could be a better encourager! I've never met anyone who didn't like being encouraged. When I coached Rachel's softball team, at the end of the season, the girls gave me a hat that said, "Mr. Encouragement." High praise! Who knows? Maybe by the end of this week, your family will give YOU a Mr....or...Mrs. ...Encouragement hat.

Our text is Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians. The Thessalonians had questions about the second coming of Christ. When Jesus ascended back to heaven after his resurrection, angels promised he would one day return. And when he did, he would set all things right in the world. All rebellion, cruelty, illness, persecution, injustice...plagues!...he would make it ALL right.

But the Thessalonians were nervous. They were experiencing persecution and wondered if they were already in the “end times.” Had Jesus returned they just missed it? And what about those who had already died? When Jesus did return, would they be out of luck? Had their loved just missed out on the second coming? They were frightened and confused.

So Paul set them straight. He assured them that Jesus had NOT yet returned. And that when he did, all Christians... including the dead ones... would be raised up to meet him and participate in Christ’s glorious reign over all the earth. So, Paul corrected their misunderstandings...and then, he said this: “Therefore encourage one another with these words. I Thessalonians 4:18”

Then, after a little more teaching, he repeated himself: Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing.” This is the word of the Lord, etc.

Many have asked me, “Pastor Mark: is this pandemic a sign of the end times?” I haven’t a clue. It certainly has some of the indicators. But whether it is or is not, one of our calls is to lift up the hope of our salvation in Jesus, especially in hard times; To offer dis-couraged people that greatest of gifts: en-couragement. To top off their courage tank.

The Greek word is so interesting. Forgive my geekiness... but the Greek word for encourage is “Parakaleo.” It was a legal term used to describe the attorney who stood next to you in a court of law. And here’s something REALLY cool: it was also Jesus’ nickname for the Holy Spirit! He called the Spirit “Paraclete.” Advocate. Defender. Encourager.

This is Pentecost Sunday when we celebrate the gift of the Holy Spirit to every believer. When Paul says, “Encourage one another- parakaleo,” it’s like saying, “I want you to be Junior Holy Spirits to each other! Just like the Spirit stands with you .... encourages you...I want you to do that for each other!” Isn’t that amazing? We are called to be little Holy Spirits of encouragement to one other. And the primary way we do this...is through our words. Paul says, “...encourage one another with these words...” Paul says.

Words are powerful, aren’t they? Back to that sacred hymn with which I started my message: “Another One Bites the Dust.” It was a controversial song at the time because of something called “backward-masking.” The idea that if you played the song backwards, you could hear a hidden message. I tested it out! I sat my room in Bakersfield, took my album... (that’s vinyl for all you retro millennials out there)... put it on the turn table and rolled it backwards. I was SURE it said, “Start to smoke marijuana. Start to smoke marijuana.”

The thinking was, when teenagers heard this song, the power of that subliminal message would influence them to smoke pot. Fortunately, since marijuana shops are an essential industry in this state, if listening to that song has stirred up a craving in you, you can run right out and take care of it!

Backward-masking was a bunch of hooey....but it IS true that words have great power. Especially words of encouragement. I want to look at three types of encouraging words that we all can speak: words of Construction, Comfort and Community.

First, we encourage when we speak words of “Construction.” That is literally what Paul says when he writes, “Therefore encourage one another and build one another up...” The word for “build” is the same word used to describe constructing a house.

One of our great acts of encouragement is to speak constructive words of praise and affirmation. Paul practiced this. In almost every letter Paul wrote (except for Galatians), he started with words of praise for the things the people WERE doing well...before turning to the things they needed to improve. He knew the encouraging power of praise. In fact, he did it in our text. Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing.” 1 Thessalonians 5:11

See that? “...just as you are doing.” He encouraged them to be better encouragers by encouraging the encouraging they were already doing!

We have a saying on our leadership team: “You multiply what you bless.” If you want more of a certain type of behavior...call it out when you see it. Praise it. Focus on that. Catch your kids doing good...or your church doing good...and brag on them if you want more of that.

A Harvard Business Review article reported that the ideal praise-to-criticism ratio is about 5-1.<sup>1</sup> Of the teams they studied, on average the most effective teams spoke words of praise 5.6 times more than words of criticism. And the single biggest determinant among married couples who remained married versus those who divorced was the ratio of positive to negative comments that partners spoke to each other. The optimal ratio was 5-1 for those who remained married...compared to .77-1 for those who divorced.

It is SO easy in this season to speak words of destruction. We are inundated with them from the media...and it plays to our worst instincts. Words of complaint, words of pessimism, words of paranoia, words of criticism, words of doom. Just when we have accomplished our goal of “flattening the curve” ... we hear how the SECOND wave will be even more destructive than the first. And of course, it’s possible; who knows! But that’s the point, no one knows. And when we focus on the negative and speak more words that are DESTRUCTIVE rather than CONSTRUCTIVE in nature...there is NOTHING encouraging about that!

I’m not suggesting we stick our heads in the sand. I’m just asking this: what is YOUR praise to criticism ratio? Do an honest self-assessment. How many of the words coming out of your mouth last week were CONstrutive versus DEstructive. Want to be a better encourager? Start here.

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<sup>1</sup> The Ideal Praise-to-Criticism Ratio, John Zenger and Joseph Folkman, March 15, 2013.

So, Paul encourages with words of construction. Secondly, we are called to encourage with words of COMFORT. Let's look at another text, II Corinthians 1: I'm just going to read it...but as I do, I want you to count how many times the word "comfort" appears.

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too. If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; and if we are comforted, it is for your comfort....

Did you count? Nine times "comfort" appears. When we suffer, God comforts us. And through that comfort, we learn to comfort others. That's the summary of this passage. But here's what I want you to see: That word "comfort"... is the SAME word as "encourage" in today's text. Parakaleo. A second way we encourage others is to speak to them words of comfort in times of pain or loss.

One of our members was in hospice. It has been so difficult in this season to provide pastoral care for those who are sick or dying. But I decided I had to go and pray and encourage him and his wife. It meant a gown, cap, gloves...the whole shebang. But they were desperate for words of comfort. And I'm so glad I went; he died the next day.

You may not be suffering right now...but there are plenty who are. People who have lost their job. Or who don't know what to do with their kids. Those who are single and experiencing the extreme isolation. Couples who were already struggling in their marriage...and now are cooped up together. We speak of the dangers of NOT staying home. Well...there are also dangers IF we stay home. The Seattle PD reports a 25% uptick in domestic violence calls. Even if we, personally, are not suffering...the Spirit of Christ calls us to notice those who are...and encourage them with words of comfort!

Words of construction, words of comfort... and finally, words of Community. That word "parakaleo"... means, literally, "to call alongside." Not just "come alongside..." although that is good. But it's more invitational than that. It is an invitation to OTHERS to come join us... to walk alongside us that we might make our journey together.

We have never lived in a neighborhood where we had good friends within walking distance of our home. Now we do. Often, I'll get a one-word text from Todd: "Walk?" It is an invitation to come alongside them; to join them in a journey around our beautiful town. At a safe distance, of course. And we do it! A LOT!

Corona makes it HARDER to invite others to come alongside, doesn't it. But the crowds I am seeing downtown suggest that more and more people have decided that part of staying healthy includes connecting with other human beings. Even if it means walking on opposite edges of

the sidewalk. "Come alongside!" You are going to have to figure out how YOU can speak encouraging words of community in a time when we are told that we cannot be together.

Parakaleo. Encouragement! I met a young woman this week who is an incredible athlete. She'll go to college on a golf scholarship. We were talking about her golf instructor, a friend of mine. She said, "I've had a lot of teachers....but he is the most encouraging person I have ever worked with." And she's right. In fact, I think this man has the spiritual gift of encouragement. Every time I am with him, my spirits are lifted. What a gift that is!

So let me ask...if I were talking to YOUR friend, would she describe you that way? If you want to elevate others...here's a great starting point: "...encourage one another and build one another up!"

I've been thinking a lot about the small businesses in our communities that are struggling to stay alive. I was trying to come up with a way we could encourage THEM. Here's one. Today, at 1:00, what if you took a walk in the business community nearest your home: downtown, uptown, Harbor North or Port Orchard Downtown. Stay safe, of course, but walk around and pray for each of the businesses that you pass. If you see a phone number or email on the door, why not reach out to the owner and tell them you are praying for them; maybe ask for more detailed prayer needs. The pastors and elders are going to be doing that near their homes. If you want to join in, it would be a great and practical way to encourage our community. Maybe I'll see you today...and if you can't come, please pray.