

## **“The Power of Encouragement”**

### **1 Peter 1:3-9**

And encouraging word is a ministry all by itself, and it’s one we can all engage in.

As Mark Knauss prepares to be ordained into the ministry of Word and Sacrament it was encouraging words along the way that pulled him into ministry.

Mark writes . . . “Growing up I had a sign in my bedroom that read, ‘Only one life will soon be past. Only what’s done for Christ will last’. The world of hospitals and medicine concerns itself with the finite physical body. God gives us a soul that is eternal, and he wants us to have a relationship with him. He sent his son so that we will let him into our hearts. I believe that, by the grace of God, I have something to offer God’s people as a pastor. My foundation of beliefs came from a Lutheran home, church, and parochial school. The people who have and continue to lead me spiritually consists of a plethora of friends and family. The Holy Spirit has helped me deliver God’s message in and outside of the formal church setting. No matter what age we are, life is filled with choices, challenges and pain. People need the grace of God, the community of faith, and communion with God. I feel that the Holy Spirit has led me through my experiences of life so that I can be an effective pastor and laborer for God’s harvest.”

### **The Power of Encouragement**

For Mark, the power of encouragement affirmed his calling to become a pastor. The idea that encouragement is empowering to people has been around for centuries. We read from the first chapter of 1 Peter today, where the apostle by that name speaks encouragingly about Christian hope to people who are suffering for their faith. Peter praised his readers, saying, “In

this you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials, so that the genuineness of your faith — being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire — may be found to result in praise and glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed ... for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.”

Near the end of this letter, Peter says more about his purpose for writing: “I have written this short letter to encourage you ...” (5:12).

Many people in our world today, including many of us in our own churches, need some support. Life is difficult, and it’s too easy to get buried under problems that come our way. Sometimes a word of encouragement is all that stands between us and giving up, breaking down or simply living in sadness. A retired pastor sitting in the pews more often than standing in the pulpit, mentioned recently that he was surprised how few sermons of encouragement he heard. “There were lots of sermons on ‘love your neighbor,’ which, of course, is a critically important teaching of our faith,” he said, “but sometimes we could use a little praise for the sincere attempts we make to actually do that.” The same pastor was driving through Maryland and noticed a church named “The Ministry of Encouragement,” and it struck him as a great name for a location where Christ is shared. That’s because, “Encouragement is what the gospel *feels* like as it moves from one believer to another.”

The New Testament verb translated as “encourage” is *parakaleo*, which can also be rendered as “to comfort,” “to console,” or “to exhort.” “Encouragement is about the life-giving power of our shared beliefs and our shared life in the Lord.”

Also, the noun form of *parakaleo* is the word Jesus used in John 14:26 to refer to the Holy Spirit. In our English Bibles, that word is variously rendered as “helper,” “companion” or “comforter.”

In his first letter to the Thessalonians, Paul tells his Christian readers to “encourage one another and build up each other” (5:11). We should not miss the “one another” part of that instruction, for it paints a picture of what the church should be. We should not only “encourage one another” but also “love one another” (John 13:34–35), “live in harmony with one another” (Romans 12:16), “welcome one another” (Romans 15:7), “greet one another” (Romans 16:16), “have the same care for one another” (1 Corinthians 12:25), “forgive one another” (Ephesians 4:32), “confess our sins to one another” (James 5:16), “pray for one another” (James 5:16) and so on.

One place we see encouragement in action is when children do something in the church, like helping on work day in 3 weeks when we clean up the lawn and courtyard. Church adults are often quick to praise or encourage the kids, and it’s a great thing that they do. We seem to sense that kids benefit from an encouraging word, but in fact, we all do. It’s an open question about who benefits most from praise: the person being praised, the person doing the praising or observers of the praise. All three can be beneficiaries.

We’ve had people volunteer to be assisting ministers even though they don’t enjoy public speaking. But after the service, a few “good job” comments from fellow members helped them understand that they had contributed to the worship that morning. Encouragement is always appreciated.

There is, of course, a difference between praise and flattery, between positive reinforcement and manipulation, and we should be careful about our motives when we praise someone. But generally, encouragement is the right thing to do — the Christian thing to do — even if we aren't sure about our motivations.

What's the opposite of being an encourager? Being overly critical, dismissive and disparaging, among other things. And sometimes it helps us change when we realize that's what we are doing. A man we'll call Dwayne tells of sitting in a restaurant with his grown son. When the son was a teenager, he had gotten into drugs and bad company, which created a lot of stress in the family and anxiety for his parents. The father and son were both strong-willed and had often been at loggerheads during those years. But somehow, the son had gotten through his problems and eventually, as a grown-up, became a contributing member of society.

While Dwayne and his son were waiting for their meals to arrive, they noticed an elderly couple come in and sit at a nearby table. The woman was overweight and appeared to be at least 80, but she was dressed like a cowgirl of 20, complete with a red Stetson, a western outfit and boots, and she also had on a good bit of glittery jewelry.

Dwayne started to make a snarky remark about her appearance to his son, but the son stopped him, saying, "Don't, Dad. Life is hard enough. Maybe what she's wearing makes her feel good. And we're not perfect either." The father was smart enough to shut up and realize that his son was the one seeing things clearly.

Dwayne became even more convinced of that the next day, when, while reading some devotional material, he came across these words from Ephesians: "Let no evil talk come out of

your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear” (4:29).

A few days after that, Dwayne was sitting in a physical therapy facility, waiting his turn for therapy for a minor foot problem. While there, an older woman entered, moving slowly aided by a walker, and wincing in obvious pain. She sat down on a chair not far from Dwayne and after a few moments, the two began to talk. She asked Dwayne what he was there for, and he told her about his foot, and then she described the much more debilitating condition she had, and how her surgery had not helped as much as she had hoped. She explained that she was now relying on the therapy, but that it caused her significant pain. Warily she added, “I don’t know how much more I can take.”

At that moment, Dwayne’s therapist stepped into the room and told him she was ready for him. For some reason, as he got up, Dwayne recalled his son’s comment in the restaurant. Then he turned back toward the woman, and said, “Don’t you give up! You can do this. God bless you.”

Sometimes the encouraging word is a ministry all by itself, and it’s one we can all engage in.

May the peace of God . . .

#659 – Will you let me be your servant