

**Christ Presbyterian Church  
Edina, Minnesota  
May 19 & 20, 2012  
John and Laura Crosby  
You & Me: Encouragement  
2 Corinthians 13:11**

*Laura:* If you have been here at all, you probably know John, but there may be some of you who haven't met me. I'm Laura, his wife. He was kind enough to invite me to join him for the sermon this morning, and I am very grateful for the privilege of being here.

We are fortunate to be able to do quite a bit in ministry together. In John's role on the board of World Vision, we get to travel quite a bit and, actually, we just got back on Friday from Sri Lanka. Now you may hear me say Sri Lanka—and, oh, yeah, been there done that—but I had to look on a map to discover where we were going. Sri Lanka is actually an island off the southern coast of India. It used to be called Ceylon and has about 22 million people. In 2004 they experienced the devastation of the tsunami we all heard about. Many people there didn't see it coming—most people didn't see it coming. They were vacationing, at the beach, or they were at work. Many are fishermen, others were at school or at home, and all of a sudden, this rogue wave came seemingly out of nowhere and crashed on them, just wiping them out and changing their lives forever.

As I look out at our congregation I see a lot of really capable, together people who look on top of things, but I know that there are those of you sitting here this morning who have experienced your own tsunami of sorts. Maybe you have discovered an unfaithful spouse or you have lost a job or you have gotten a cancer diagnosis or you have a prodigal child who is far from God, and you may be sitting here this morning just in total discouragement, really not even being completely here. But many of us, I think, experience just the daily kind of waves of discouragement or maybe periodic waves of discouragement.

It is ironic that as we were preparing for this morning, I told John I was going through a week where I was feeling discouraged. No big tsunami deal, but just kind of the everyday stuff that many of us encounter when sometimes we get overly tired because we have been traveling or we have been up all night with a baby, and we lose perspective. Or we compare our lives with someone else's and feel like we come up short, or maybe we get a bad grade or a bad report or we feel left out or someone is critical of us. But whether they are big tsunami waves or little waves, I think that this discouragement causes us to ask, do I really matter? Is everything going to be okay? Am I all alone or is there somebody else in this with me?

*John:* We are in a series on relationships, so it is a natural to include my closest relationship in this talk. One of the things that we wanted to say about encouragement is exactly what Laura was talking about. We need help. We need help getting through the ups and downs in the kind of lives that every single one of us on this planet lives. We need help because Satan's goal, the

Evil One's goal, is to *dis*-courage us, to take away our courage and our hope, to *dis*-courage us through the *dis*-tortion of truth about God and about ourselves and our lives.

We need relationships. God has created us to be in relationship. Scripture says that two are better than one because when one falls down, *when* one falls down, the other can pick us up. Encouragement is picking each other up, giving life to relationships. We thought it would be helpful for you as you listen to us to think of someone who has encouraged you, someone who is an encouraging presence in your life. Yesterday if you heard the children's sermon, Joe said, "Rich Phenow really ought to be the one talking about encouragement. Every time I think about Rich, I think about encouragement." Who is that for you? Who has encouraged you? What kind of difference has it made in your life?

*Laura:* The word *encouragement* actually comes from a Greek verb that literally means *to come alongside*, but I think it means so much more than that. When we encourage others, we remind them of whom they are, gifted, capable, beloved, and we remind them of whose they are, precious children belonging to an Almighty God. All of us want to know that we matter. All of us want to know that it is going to be okay. All of us want to know that we are not alone. I used to think that encouragement was just kind of a nice thing, kind of a bonus, like people opening a door for you or saying *please* and *thank you*, but as I studied for this sermon, I have become convinced that encouragement is a crucial part of God's plan for us, and we play a vital role. I believe that we are God's agents on earth sent here to remind each other of the truth that God answers each of our concerns affirmatively, "Yes, you matter. You are precious to Me! Yes, it is going to be okay. I cause all things to work together for good." And "Yes, I am here. You are not alone. I will never leave you or forsake you."

*John:* If that is what encouragement is, that reminder of whom you really are and that relationships are supposed to help us, then it is important to realize what encouragement is not, because there are a lot of fake substitutes for encouragement. There is flattery. Someone might say, "Oh, honey, I really like that shirt, but does it really go with the polka dot pants?" This may not be encouragement. Or somebody might say, "Oh, honey, you are so much better at money than I am, why don't *you* balance the checkbook?" I am not sure that that is really encouragement as much as it is manipulation, masking as encouragement. Beyond the jokes, some of you, probably many of you, are in danger of the false encouragement of affirming children all the time for every single thing that they do. When we affirm children 24/7 for everything, they tune us out and don't believe it when we really mean it. Encouragement has to be telling the truth so that people feel better because they see whom they really are or whom they really could be. So today we want to look at encouragement through the lens of relationships found in Scripture in the Book of Acts. Acts is all about encouragement. A form of the word *encouragement* is used at least 12 times in chapter 28, this one short chapter.

*Laura:* So after the Gospels we get to the Book of Acts. Jesus has come and lived among the people. He turned the world upside down and showed them a radically new way to live. He died on the cross and came back to life and left the disciples, with the help of His Holy Spirit, a charge to continue the work of Kingdom-bringing on earth until He returns. So the church was like this little toddler, learning to take its first wobbly steps, facing danger and confusion and discouragement at every turn. The people really needed each other like we need each other. They needed people to cheer and say, "You can do it" and to pick them up when they fell down. This young church was vulnerable, and there was nothing that Satan would like more than to

discourage and defeat this outpost of the Kingdom here on earth. We see in 1<sup>st</sup> Peter 5 and in John 8 that Satan is the father of lies. He wanted these early believers and us to believe we are worthless, that there is no plan and that we are all alone.

### **Encouragement does something**

*John:* Into that story comes a man named Barnabas. Barnabas, Hebrew for *bar*, son of, and *nabas*, encouragement, the son of encouragement, lives up to his name. He gives us a living picture of what encouragement should look like, and the first thing he shows us is that encouragement *does* something. It shows up and *does* something. In Acts 4 it says this,

<sup>36</sup> Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means Son of Encouragement), <sup>37</sup> sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles' feet.

He gave the money to the apostles to use in their ministry to the poor. He demonstrates belief in God and confidence in these other people. We are in this together. You are valuable. He reminds them whom they are and whose they are because he *did* something.

*Laura:* This is what someone did for me years ago when I was going through a very discouraging and dark time. A friend of mine showed up on my doorstep with a bowl containing rocks and a bulb (*bowl shown*) and said, "Laura, I know that you feel like your life looks a lot like this, very barren and bleak right now, but I want to give you this as a picture of hope because I believe that no matter how dark it looks right now, God is going to bring something beautiful from your pain. Just like the bulb in this planter looks bleak right now, it is going to bloom into something beautiful, and I believe that is what God is going to do for you, too." My friend showed up and *did* something. She showed me a picture of the hope she had for me.

### **Encouragement says something**

*John:* Encouragement *does* something, but its primary expression is to *say* something. In Acts 11, it says,

<sup>22</sup> News of this reached the ears of the church at Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. <sup>23</sup> When he arrived and saw the evidence of the grace of God, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts. <sup>24</sup> He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord. <sup>25</sup> Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul....

And in chapter 14 we see how Barnabas has taught Paul the ministry of encouragement. Paul and Barnabas preached the good news,

<sup>22</sup> ...strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith.

When we say, "I believe in you, you can do this, God will show up," it reminds us of whom we are, creations of the all-powerful Creator of the Universe, and that we are the ones God looks at every morning and smiles and says, "You're great!"

We have this privilege of being in relationship with thousands of children in Africa. One time Laura and I were part of a team that was visiting our sponsored children in Uganda. We were traveling in a World Vision convoy truck going from village to village, and we had stopped on the side of the road to go into some huts. On the other side of the road, a little boy sees the World Vision truck and runs back into his hut. He comes back out and comes running toward us, waving two things in his hand, shouting “Geewiz, geewiz!” I had no idea what he was saying. I thought he was speaking in the Ugandan tongue. He showed us what he had in his hand, a picture of a family from Edina, Minnesota, Al and Mary Geiwitz, and a note that Al and Mary’s kids had written to him. He had been saving them year after year in his hut, not tacked up on a bulletin board, he didn’t have one, but under the little mat of straw that he slept on because somebody had spoken encouragement to him.

## **Encouragement shows up**

*Laura:* So encouragement does something, it says something and lastly, it shows up, especially in hard times. Before he met Jesus on the road to Damascus and became a follower, we know that Paul was a brutal persecutor of Christians, overseeing murders. After he became a Christian and arrived in Jerusalem, the disciples were understandably reticent to greet him. They thought his story might be a trick. Only Barnabas risked his life to meet with Paul and to then convince the others to include him. In Acts 9:26-27 it says about Paul,

<sup>26</sup> When he came to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he really was a disciple. <sup>27</sup> But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles. He told them how Saul on his journey had seen the Lord and that the Lord had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had preached fearlessly in the name of Jesus.

Barnabas showed up in a hard time and came alongside of Paul. He communicated. He said, “You are not alone.” People have shown up for me, too, in hard times. Many, many years ago someone came to my door with a prayer shawl like this (*shawl shown*) and said, “I have been working on this for you and as I have knitted it, I have prayed for you. I will continue to pray for you, but I just wanted to give you this to remind you that you are not alone. There are others with you in this hard time, and we are praying for you.”

*John:* That is what encouragement looks like. That is what we hunger for in relationships, and what we want to share with others. But for me, the reality is that encouragement a lot of times does not mark our relationships and worse, frankly, it does not mark our closest relationships. Sometimes you are probably more encouraging to people out there than you are to people in your own family, your children, your parents, your spouse. The ones closest to us often do not feel encouraged by us, and I wondered what it is that prevents us from being encouraging to the people in our lives. We came up with some ideas. It is hard for people who are feeling discouraged themselves, feeling worn down, to help others feel better. In the same sense, sometimes we get so self-absorbed that we don’t pay attention to what is going on in other people’s lives. It is not that we are pride-filled or angry. We just have our heads down, doing our own thing. I think, frankly, we have a pattern of setting the bar awfully high for the people we know best. They often feel like they disappoint us or they are not quite living up to what we want because we have not encouraged them, but I have to tell you, for me encouragement cannot take place at 110 miles an hour.

Last week before we left, I had lunch with Sarah Norton, our Director of Kids' Ministries. She is going on sabbatical for the summer, and I wanted to check in with her. I said, "Sarah, your ministry is doing great. You are a terrific leader of the staff. You've grown a healthy team, and they are doing fabulous with the kids." We had a great lunch, but as we were driving back to the office, she said to me, "John, do you mind if I say the last 10 percent?" Now in our staff setting, that means, we've had 90 percent of the conversation. We've told the hard things. We've gone there. We've done everything. The last 10 percent is the hard part, the part you are afraid to say because that will make the conversation go bad. So when she said to me, "Can I say the last 10 percent?" I said, "Don't say another word." I could tell, you know, that this wasn't going to be as fun as the last hour.

She said, "Since I have come here, I have loved the encouragement I have received from you, when you tell me that I am doing well or that you admire this or that. I have so treasured the notes you have written to me and the other members of the team over the years. Those notes, John, I save them." Like Laura and I save notes of encouragement. Then she said, "John, the last 10 percent is that I haven't gotten a note from you in well over a year and I wonder, if I haven't, are others also not feeling encouraged by you? What do you think?" I can tell you I am going to start writing some more cards.

*Laura:* Like John said, it is often the people closest to us that we neglect to affirm and encourage. One of the things I am so thankful for about John is that he encourages me by honoring me. Every woman wants to hear that her husband is proud of her. Every man, woman, and child wants someone to brag about them, but it is often the people closest to us that we overlook.

### Three challenges

So we want to make this practical. We looked at pictures of encouragement from the Book of Acts and would like to share three challenges for all of us in terms of application. The first one is, **because others will always let us down, we need to first be encouraged by God.** We need to fill our minds with the truth of His Word about who we are and to whom we belong. For example, God says in Isaiah,

<sup>2</sup>When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned....

We need to keep reminding ourselves of that promise, of that encouragement. Also, there is a resource that some of you may not be aware of to help you make that step of being encouraged first of all by God. It is called *Message Gear*. It takes the message of each week's sermon into the following week and provides additional interaction with God's Word. This tool is available both online and in hard copy. We have printed up some extra copies, and they are on the big round table out in the great room if you would like to grab one as you go out.

*John:* So for followers of Jesus, encouragement is receiving a gift from God, but being encouraged by God is learning to share it with others. That leads us to the second challenge. We would challenge you to look at your own relationships. **You cannot encourage others unless you are *in* relationship.** Scripture talks about David, the shepherd boy who becomes

King, and Prince Jonathan. In 1<sup>st</sup> Samuel Jonathan says,

<sup>7</sup> ...I am with you heart and soul.”

David and Jonathan were knit together, heart and soul. Are there people in your life that you are knit together with heart and soul? Is there somebody who is walking with you? That is why almost every week here we talk about small groups. We want to provide a setting where people might become close. It is not enough to just have that relationship though. We need to pay attention. Again, often we are more sensitive to the needs of people out there than we are to the people closest to us, so our prayer, our challenge, this week is that you will be aware of the people who need encouragement, whom God puts right in front of you, whether it is a sponsored child or the checkout person, whether it is your boss, or a teenager, or somebody in your home.

*Laura:* The last challenge ties into that one, and it is just, **let's do something, say something, or show up for at least one other person this next week.** I hope as we have been talking that someone has come to mind who maybe could use a little bit of encouragement. I am sure you can think of a lot of ideas but we've brainstormed and come up with a few. Maybe you could write a note of thanks or affirmation like we've mentioned or take someone a gift that continues to be a reminder of encouragement or prepare a meal to encourage someone. On Facebook, you might "like" or comment or post on someone's wall, or you might make a phone call. In contrast to saying something, another way to encourage is to just listen, to be still and let someone pour their heart out to you. Or perhaps you are at a restaurant and the server looks tired and worn out. You could give an extravagant tip as an encouragement. You could text a line to someone to remind them that they matter or tell them that you are praying for them. As you do these things, I pray that you will remember, you are not just being nice, you are partnering with God in His work in the world.

*The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.*