

Christ Presbyterian Church

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We Have to Talk: Because I Need Some Encouragement

1 Thessalonians 5:11-15; 2 Corinthians 13:11

Words. Words are powerful. Words can build others up or they can tear them down. Encouragement is powerful. Well, I wanted you to enjoy with me some encouragement that many of us have experienced, but many of you haven't because these have been up on the second floor of the church in the hallway. But I captured a few of them just for you to enjoy. These were for our campaign. We asked our kids—our first, second and third graders, and our kindergarteners—to draw some pictures and to give us reasons why they love their church. [Pictures shown.] Now, it's easy for Isaac; Isaac is here because of his friend Rafi. That's why you should love your church—your friends are here. And then we see from Allison that she loves singing, she loves playing, she loves Fam Jam, and she loves puppies. Hey, we are the only church that provides puppies in our church school program. Of course she would love church, we have puppies here. I love this one from Brendon. He did an awesome job drawing our organ, but when he was asked what it was, he called it the orchestra machine. And, I love this one: I love my church because I get to break dance and sing at my church. We teach hip-hop and rap and break dancing at our church. Why would you *not* want to be here? And this one is one of my favorites: I love my church, says Abby, because we worship God and God worships us! Think about that. God adores us. He delights in us, and He loves it when we worship Him. What a gift it is for us to be encouraged by children, and to be reminded by them of what encouragement looks like.

Were in this new series, this relationship series called "We Need to Talk", and we will be continuing this over the next four weeks. John and Laura kicked it off for us, and the whole idea of this series is that we want to encourage ways that we can develop healthier and better relationships. John and Laura talked about the idea that we bring all of who we are into our relationships. We bring in all our baggage, and it's so much easier to be able to analyze other people's baggage than to have an awareness of our own baggage. And they talked about ways that we can unpack our suitcases with God's help. And with the help of others, we can see how our baggage damages our relationships. There are a number of resources that we will point you to over the next couple of weeks, but I just want to point you to this one right now. It's written by John Ortberg, and it's called "*Everybody's Normal Till You Get to Know Them.*" How true is that? It's an awesome book on how we forgive, and how we accept, and how we embrace who we are.

So today I want to look at this whole idea of encouragement and of affirmation, and how to develop trust and how to build confidence, how to deepen hope and how to increase

mutual love and respect. I believe that encouragement and gratitude and affirmation have a way of healing the baggage and the brokenness in our lives. Some of us remember that this last November, Blair Walsh missed a field goal, a 27 yard chip shot against the Seahawks that would have extended the Viking's ability to play into the playoffs. After the game, I was listening to the radio, and I know that Facebook and Twitter just blew up with harsh words: *the guy's a jerk, he's a bum, the guy's a failure.* But how do first graders at North Park Elementary school deal with that kind of stuff? What they do is, they draw pictures and they write statements to Mr. Walsh: "Mr. Walsh, just try, try, and try again." "Mr. Walsh, nothing to cry about. It's just a game." "Mr. Walsh, it's ok. We all make mistakes." And, "Mr. Walsh, you're the best kicker I know."

Now, after being deeply touched by that encouragement, what did Mr. Walsh do? He visited the class. He visited the students and the teachers, and he thanked them for their encouragement. He signed autographs and brought gifts. Kids, first-graders, they have the ability to cheer on adults. They have the ability to motivate adults and they have the ability to put back courage where it belonged in Mr. Walsh. What a gift that we can give through our encouragement.

Jesus was the consummate, ultimate encourager. Jesus encouraged through His words and His examples. He encouraged in the ways that He was present to those around Him. He said this in John's gospel: "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God and trust also in Me, for I am leaving you with a gift, the gift of peace. It's the kind of peace that the world can't give you, so don't be troubled and don't be afraid." To the paralytic who was lying on his bed, Jesus said, "Take courage, your sins are forgiven. Get up, grab your mat, and go home." On the Sea of Galilee in the middle of the night in a treacherous storm the disciples are in a boat and they're frightened out of their minds. What does Jesus do? He says, "Take courage. Don't be afraid. It is me." In the upper room at the last supper, Jesus spoke words of encouragement. He said, "I have told you these things so that you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble, but take courage. I have overcome the world."

We are people starving for compliments, people needing affirmation and encouragement. We need to hear *job well done*. We need a pat on the back. We need words that will bring deep joy and contentment when said from the heart. Words like, "Steve, I'll never forget how you took care of that family, and how you compassionately loved them." Words like, "Kristen, I just want you to know you're an overcomer, and that you loved Brian so long." And words like, "Sandra, you never give up. You never give up."

So we need to hear those words. We're all in a position to give encouragement. We need to be encouragement givers, and yet we so frequently miss the opportunity. And I think we miss the opportunity because we're so focused on ourselves. I think we miss it because we're preoccupied; we're in a hurry and we're self-absorbed. And I think it's just easier, for a lot of us, it's just easier to criticize. It's just easier to find fault in others. It's just easier to make quick judgements about somebody's character or personality, and most of the time it's about our own insecurity and our need to build ourselves up at

the expense of others. Or, it could be because we assume that those in our relational world already know how we feel, even though we've never told them; we've never expressed to them that we care, or that we love. In my many years of counseling individuals and families and couples, I've never had an adolescent daughter come to me and say, "I'm here because my mom is a problem. She's a problem because she just encourages me too much. She's constantly affirming me, and it's driving me crazy." I've never had a wife come to me and say, "My husband has a need, and that is that he's always fabricating things about me. He's always saying things that encourage me far too frequently." Never had that experience.

When I'm working with couples in the process of premarital counseling, I give them an assignment, a writing assignment. I ask them to respond to a bunch of questions separately. And one of the questions is to list at least 8 attributes about their future spouse that they really appreciate and love. And I tell them not to share with each other; keep it a secret. And in our last session together, I have them turn and face each other, and in front of me, articulate to the other what they appreciate most. Now, this time is a holy time, and it's often met with tears and with joy. And the response is often *I hoped you felt that way about me, but I've never heard you say it*. It's powerful. It's a powerful time for me to see firsthand how much it means to us to be encouraged and affirmed for who we are and who we are becoming.

Now, I grew up in a home where my mom was so preoccupied with raising so many of us, that until later in life, she really wasn't able to encourage much. She was focused, I think, mostly on survival. And my dad, well, this was something my dad just did not know how to do; it was a reflection of how he was raised himself. He was raised with fear and shame, and fear and shame was how he raised his children. Shame has been a piece of luggage for me that I have dealt with because the shameful message that he communicated over and over again was that you never could quite measure up to his standards. You were never quite good enough. And the one that hurt my soul the deepest was that he would actually say, "You don't know what you're talking about because you're so stupid." And that word stupid just wounded me deeply. So much so that in high school and through college I struggled, wondering if I was smart enough, and thinking that everyone else in the room was smarter than me and that I had to work so much harder than everybody else. It raises to the level for me...oftentimes when it's about preaching, I just struggle immediately with this sense of *what do I have to offer? Everybody else in the room is smarter than me*. But see, shame is a message about ourselves that isn't true, but for some reason we believe it. And so I've had to heal from the wounding of that message. One of his favorite sayings was, "Son, there's a shirt on your back, there's shoes on your feet, there's food on your plate, what more could you want?" I would think *hey dad, how about—Rich, I love you. Or, Son, I love you*. Now, I was told he told others that he was proud of me, but he never said it to me. Encouragement costs us absolutely nothing. Encouragement doesn't require a box or wrapping paper; it doesn't require a card or money. It just requires an honest expression from the heart of our appreciation and our love. It's never based on condition. It's never based on performance or what we expect somebody to do. It's about somebody at their core—who they are and what they mean to us. That's what encouragement is.

We have started a new tradition at the last couple of birthdays in our family. It's this new tradition where we say that gifts are optional. Our children are now adults and we're not quite sure what to get them; most of the time if we do get them something it's probably not right anyway, so we have talked about not giving presents. So what we do, and what we did last week was—there is a member of our family who is an older woman in the house, and it happened to be her 60th birthday. I can't believe I married an older woman...I'm not 60 until June. But, it was Jodi's birthday, and we sat around the table and for well over an hour and a half, we told stories. Stories about what a gift she is to us, and the ways she has loved us. And we laughed and we cried. It was a birthday encouragement celebration.

See, encouragement helps us to grow. It builds trust beyond our confidence. It gives the freedom to fail and to grow. It's measured not by the degree of happiness it creates, but it's measured by the degree of self-confidence and appreciation that it produces. See, it's measured by the sense of value and worthwhileness that we can give to each other beyond our performance.

Paul said these words to remind us of encouragement and how it builds relationships. In 1 Thessalonians Paul said:

¹¹ Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing. ¹² Now we ask you, brothers and sisters, to acknowledge those who work hard among you, who care for you in the Lord and who admonish you. ¹³ Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work. Live in peace with each other. ¹⁴ And we urge you, brothers and sisters, warn those who are idle and disruptive, encourage the disheartened, help the weak, be patient with everyone. ¹⁵ Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always strive to do what is good for each other and for everyone else.

[1 Thessalonians 5:11-15]

Encourage one another and build each other up. Encourage the disheartened. Help the weak and be patient with everyone, and always strive to do good for each other and everyone else. And then Paul said this to the new church in Corinth. In 2 Corinthians he said,

¹¹ Finally, brothers and sisters, rejoice! Strive for full restoration, encourage one another, be of one mind, live in peace. And the God of love and peace will be with you. [2 Corinthians 13:11]

Paul wants these new believers to look around themselves. He wants them to see those who need support and encouragement. And he wants them, in words and in actions, to dispense that encouragement. He's telling the believers to express their newfound faith by the way they see the needs of others and address those needs through their words and through their actions.

So let me just spend these last few minutes talking about how we develop this discipline of encouragement. How do we become radical encouragers? How do we become people who freely give encouragement to others? I want to say that the first way we do that is by listening well; it's through being fully present with someone. See, it's way beyond Minnesota nice. It's saying to someone, "How are you *really* doing?" and then staying long enough to allow them to answer the question. See, it's listening—fully focused listening.

I daily read the obituaries because I have a large family and because I think that's part of our call, and so I found this one in January in the newspaper, and I thought what a great way to be remembered. This woman, Amy Keppel, is a physician and is skilled in so many things. Her friend Kathy said this: "For two decades, Amy has had the ability to listen, and that's what I will miss most about her. She listened so carefully with her whole being; sometimes she closed her eyes in concentration." Kathy went on to say, "You knew that she was listening, and she made you feel like you were the most important person in her world."

Listening—it's what it does. It causes that person in our presence to feel like they are the most important person in our world. It's listening to their thoughts and their feelings and their behaviors and their experiences, without judgement. It's listening, and not agreeing with them; it's understanding someone. And what we need to become is a verbal mirror that reflects their feelings and their thoughts and their behaviors. Listening is a key way to encourage.

Our daughter Kiersti, when she was about four years old, was quite verbal and I found that I could multitask while I asked her how things were going. So, I asked Kiersti about her day—she was sitting at the island on a stool in our kitchen—and I turned my back and I started chopping some vegetables. She kept talking and talking, and pretty soon she said, "Dad! Turn around!" So I turned around and she said, "Come here." And I got down with my big face in her little face, and she grabbed me on the side of my face and pulled me to her face and she said to me, "You listen to me with your eyes!" We listen with our eyes; we listen with our ears; we listen with our hearts. See, it's not speaking. It's not even saying *I can relate to you*. It's being fully present. Listening.

Secondly we can encourage others by our actions, by our behaviors, by random acts of encouragement. This Friday afternoon I was busy at home, preparing for my sermon. I'd had kind of a full week and suddenly I hear this tap on the door, and this person bursts in with a huge salad. It's Heather Hood, and she said, "Here, I know this is your favorite salad, and I just wanted to bring this gift to you." You'll never know how much that salad meant—what an expression of encouragement it was—and how much I love Heather because she is one of the greatest encouragers I know. See, it's about showing up in people's lives. It's not asking someone: *what can I do for you? or if you need something, just let me know*. When people are hurting and in crisis and grieving, they don't know what they need or want, and so it's about showing up; it's about *doing* something. The act of encouragement is not waiting for permission. You might have to ask for

forgiveness afterwards, but it always works just to show up and express whatever God has put on your heart.

This Valentine's weekend, or on Wednesday, we went with our Tapestry kids [CPC ministry for special needs students] to 7500 York. And we had a Valentine's party and we sang songs, and the kids made cookies and cards and passed them out to the seniors there. It was an amazingly holy event. We brought cupcakes and juice...and I get this card from this woman named Grace Mary, a Catholic woman who was invited to the Valentine's party:

Dear Pastor Rich Phenow and the Tapestry Ministry,

What a super Valentine's party! It was a party that brought young people to old people. What a joyful group of youth, doing good works of mercy with great joy. The hymn-sing was wonderful; you even brought the songbooks! Individually you made cards for us. You demonstrated what was on the inside of the cards—love, love, love—and it was accomplished through cookies and cupcakes with mounds of frosting. Plus, you even gave us three choices of fruit juice drinks! What a splendid party. Thank you, thank you. God's grace is shining down on all of us through your ministries there.

Gratefully and encouraged,
Grace Mary

It's about showing up. It's about action. It's about listening.

And finally, it's about our words, because we know that our words are powerful. Proverbs says this: Don't withhold good from those who deserve it when it's in your power to act. [Paraphrase of Proverbs 3:27] Words of encouragement. Encouraging words. What they do is they have the power to heal. They have the power to build up and not to destroy. They have the power to restore trust, to heal pains. See, unlike a soccer game where words can hurt, the right kind of encouragement can help.

We have a daughter who has this gift of encouragement, and she sent me this text message that I've read a hundred times: *Daddy-O, You are the best in the whole wide world, seriously. I'm the luckiest little girl out there, to call you my poppy. Can't tell you how many people at the wedding told me they think you are gifted in what you do and how touching your message was. You are an amazing daddy. Thank you always for loving me and encouraging me in immeasurable ways. Daddy, you're beautiful and I love you.*

Words, words...powerful words speak deeply to the soul. Words of encouragement.

OK. So it's just another sermon. Just another sermon. But it's more than just another sermon, because I always wanted to be a college professor but I never felt smart enough. So, I'm giving you an assignment. Not an assignment for extra credit, and it's not an optional assignment; it's a required assignment. We're giving you—and we've spared no expense to do it—we're giving you a piece of stationary. In fact, we'll give you

two or three of them. I'm asking you to write, out of gratitude in your heart, a letter of encouragement to someone who has encouraged you. And this person has to be alive. You can't send it to them, otherwise we would have given you a stamp and an envelope. You have to go in person. Laminate it, have it rehearsed, and go in person to read it to them. Read it to them, and you will experience first-hand the power of encouragement. I gave this assignment a couple of months ago at a family retreat, and this young guy—he took it as an assignment from a college professor. He wrote the letter and he went to his uncle and he read it. And he told me the story about how his uncle was a father to him. And he said, "I read the letter, and it seemed for like an hour all we did was hold each other and cry." Actions, listening, and our words of encouragement. Write the letter.

Let's pray: Gracious God, you have encouraged us. You've encouraged us through a cross and an empty tomb. You've given us grace that we don't deserve and forgiveness, but it is your nature to give it. And I pray that you will help us be radical; that you will help us be barbarians, generous with our encouragement. That we, gracious God, will be encouragers of others. That we will write the letter. That God, we will listen well, that we will act on the desires that you place in our hearts, that we will often and frequently give words of encouragement, through your power. Amen.

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.