

Surviving Co-Vid- 19 through Encouragement

(Reflection by Rev. Peggy McDonagh, May 10, 2020)

My friends, the love of God within me honors the love of God within each of you. I would like to begin this reflection by inviting you to think about one person whose encouragement made a difference in your life.

For me, that person was a professor I had at St. Andrew's College. As a student I was often critical of myself and quite insecure. Despite having graduated from university, I still lacked confidence in my ability to succeed in Theological College. I fought hard to dispel these personal negative feelings.

During our first year at St. Andrew's, exploring the complex field of theology was a new experience, and it was challenging because some of us needed the support of our professors to help us make sense of what we were expected to learn. We found that many of the professors were unwilling to provide support and guidance.

There was one professor who went out of her way to value us as students and give us the attention we needed. Her guidance, encouragement, and willingness to give of her time enabled many of us to persevere and get through those College assignments. I will be forever grateful for her encouragement, kindness, and unwillingness to be like the other professors and for her wisdom that enabled me to believe in my ability to succeed.

Today's reading from the Gospel of John is a profound example of how Jesus encouraged his disciples in order to dispel their fear and anxiety. In this passage, the disciples and Jesus have gathered in the upper room for the last supper. We hear how the disciples are troubled, discouraged, and fearful because Jesus is telling them that he is not going to be with them for much longer. They find themselves in a critical and emotional situation.

Let us recall that Jesus had been with this group of followers for three years. These people left their jobs to follow him, and throughout their time together, they witnessed and learned so much. We can only imagine the intimate friendships and comradeship that must have developed. Jesus touched their hearts and lives with his compassion, his teachings about the boundless love of God, and his ability to challenge people's narrow religious views.

As the scriptures suggests, the thought of being separated from their teacher troubled the disciples deeply. They were aware that Jesus' life was in danger, that the priests and the rulers of the Roman empire were out to get him. They were afraid of losing Jesus and they were upset by his words that he was leaving them for good. Anxious foreboding filled their minds. The cold clutch of fear gripped their hearts.

Sensing their distress and apprehension, Jesus offered words of encouragement to calm down their troubled hearts. He insisted that even though he was leaving, his connection with them had been so integral and intimate that separation was not possible. Jesus told them that if they followed his teachings – especially the new commandment to love one another as he had loved them – that this would be a sign of his ongoing communion with them.

He encourages, telling them to “let not your hearts be troubled, believe.” I could imagine Jesus saying, 'Just keep hearing my instructions, and walking in the way of love – and we will be together. You may find that our companionship is even closer than it is now. In the days to come, I will live in you and you in me. When I am no longer here you will be my body, my hands, and feet. You will speak the words that people need for healing and justice and good news. I will abide in you, and you will abide in me.'

Jesus encouraged his followers to believe in what they knew, what they had learned, and the wisdom within themselves to guide them, knowing that he would be with them, always. Jesus was the ideal encourager.

My friends, we are living in a critical and emotional time. Just like the disciples, everything we have known and become accustomed to has changed. When we first entered this strange new world the thought of being separated from our loved ones was unimaginable. As stores, restaurants, shops, churches and businesses closed, as people were laid off and the economy plummeted, greater unease grew. As the virus made its way around the world and people were dying, deep fear settled in.

Our hearts became deeply troubled when this began, and even though we are slowly adjusting to this new reality, our hearts are still unsettled and fearful. Many people are worried and stressed about the economy, lost jobs, lost community, living in isolation, and being separated from those they love. The list of concerns is daunting. Encouragement matters a lot these days. It matters more than ever, because we need it to give us confidence, hope, inspiration, motivation, and courage.

In *The Counselling Psychologist Journals* there is a research paper written by Y. Joel Wong of Indiana University in 2015. In this paper Wong discusses the merits of using encouragement in psychological methodology. He references several other psychologists who had also written about the use of encouragement in counseling sessions.

In 1956 Psychologist Alfred Adler claimed that “encouragement was a core feature of human development.” He also suggested that the ability to “encourage others was the single most important attribute in getting along with other people.” Human beings have deep-seated needs to belong, to fit in, to feel valued and loved, and to help others. Encouragement is a valuable way by which we can help one another sense that we belong, that we fit in, and that we are valued and loved.

The word encouragement derives from a combination of the prefix 'en' which means "to put into" and the Latin root 'cor' which means "heart." Encouragement goes to the heart and creates a positive response. It affirms that we have what it takes to sustain ourselves and each other in whatever situations we find ourselves. When we offer each other encouragement, we are saying that we have confidence in and trust that together we can persevere and overcome.

In 2009 Psychologist T.J. Sweeny suggested that encouragement is effective because it instills the “courage that helps to reduce fear, perseverance that combats a desire to give up, confidence that addresses low self-effectiveness, inspiration that resolves a lack of motivation or creativity, and hope that decreases pessimism about the future.

To provide encouragement,” he says, “is to inspire or help others, particularly toward a conviction that they can work on finding solutions and that they can cope with any predicament. It helps one develop one’s inner resources toward positive movement.” This is what Jesus did for his disciples.

In his book *Saying YES to Life*, Ezra Bayda writes, “Your difficulties are not obstacles on the spiritual path, they **are** the path.” We all know that problems and trials are a part of life and can easily trap us in misery, disillusionment, and despair. As we experience the tribulations of life, encouraging words can give us what we need to stay the course.

Getting around on crutches causes much frustration and exacerbates the pain in my shoulders and arthritic hand. Every day I depend on self-encouragement to strengthen my resolve. When I am ready for the day and standing on the top of the stairs to go out, I shower myself with motivation and then just forge ahead. When I am discouraged, I think of the encouraging words from *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, “Don’t let the muggles get you down.” In other words, don’t let the crutches get you down.

We all need people and things in our lives that give us encouragement and enable us to believe in ourselves and to know that we have what we need to sustain us on this journey. Author and spiritual director Margaret Wheatley found her form of encouragement by writing a small book entitled *Perseverance* designed to be carried around and quietly consulted to give encouragement whenever situations, circumstances, or emotions threaten one’s capacity to keep going.

I know that encouragement lessens the temptation to give up, empowers us to overcome the hopelessness, bitterness, and frustration that can result when we get mired down in life’s problems and challenges. It feeds the inner strength we require when confronted by life’s obstacles.

I want to take this opportunity to let you know how much I appreciate the emails, cards and words of thanks and support about the worship services and our efforts to live stream them. Your words and thoughts have been encouraging and helpful. I also wish to thank you for all the wonderful ways you are reaching out and encouraging each other.

People all over the world are doing such a remarkable job at encouraging one another using home videos and their sharing of the many innovative ways they have found to keep active. We receive encouragement from TV commercials that express appreciation, and the many stories being shared of how people are connecting and reaching out. It is encouraging to see people doing their best to respect boundaries, keep isolated, and be cautious yet continuing to do little things that make a big difference.

The more we encourage ourselves and each other, the better we can settle our troubled hearts and believe in what we know, what we are learning, and that we have the wisdom within ourselves to guide us through this time of crisis. The more we are encouraged, the more we are empowered to persevere and to engage this life positively and productively and, in so doing receiving both spiritual and emotional support.

Author and motivational speaker John C. Maxwell said, "Remember, man does not live on bread alone: sometimes he needs a little buttering up." In his book *The Light in the Heart*, Roy T. Bennett writes, "Be an Encourager: When you encourage others, you boost their self-esteem, enhance their self-confidence, make them work harder, lift their spirits and make them successful in their endeavors. Encouragement goes straight to the heart and is always available. Be an encourager." May we all continue to be encouragers to one another. Amen.