

Encourage each other. Sermon. 11/13/11
Fr. Hugh St. George. 1 Thessalonians 5:11

A group of 25-year-old girls who'd known each other since High School were planning a reunion and discussing where they should meet.

They decided to meet at the Ocean View restaurant, because the beer was cheap, the band was good, and there were lots of cute guys.

20 years later, at 45 years of age, the ladies discussed where they should go for their get together.

They agreed they should meet at the Ocean View restaurant, because the Martinis were big, the waiters were patient, and if they went a bit late there would be no noisy children there.

20 years later, at the age of 65, the group discussed at length where they should meet. They finally agreed to meet at the Ocean View restaurant, because the lighting was good, the fresh fish is good for your cholesterol, and they have early bird specials.

Besides the place held good memories for them.

20 years later, at the age of 85, the group were discussing where they should meet.

Finally they agreed that they should meet at the Ocean View restaurant, because they had never been there before.

There never seems to be quite enough.

People often have a hard time being forthcoming and generous with it, as if giving it would somehow take something away from oneself.

You probably think I'm talking about money. But I'm not. I'm talking about encouragement. There is a tremendous need for encouragement and yet there is not enough of it going around.

There is a strong undercurrent of pessimism in many people's personal lives, as well as in the public sphere. And the United States is a more positive and optimistic nation than most.

Even so, encouragement and optimism are sadly in short supply. If you're not sure that's true, just watch an hour of news, or listen to the conversations you hear over coffee or lunch, and notice how little of it has an encouraging tone.

An eminent theologian in the last century, Dr. William Barclay wrote, "It is easy to laugh at people's ideals. It is easy to discourage others. The world is full of discouragers. But we have a Christian duty to encourage one another.

"Many a time, a word of praise, or appreciation, or good cheer has kept someone on their feet."

On a personal level, how much encouragement do you receive on a daily basis?

Do you get messages of encouragement every day through the mail, or on the phone?

Do you walk to your mailbox with a happy feeling of anticipation? How often does someone tell you you're wonderful?

Conversely, how many communications do you get each week that tell you that you're really not good enough, not smart enough, not good looking enough - or in countless ways, some subtle, some blunt, let you know that you're just not up to par?

Many people have been discouraging others for so long that they're not even aware that they're doing it.

But as Christians we're told very clearly to encourage each other.

In this morning's reading from St. Paul's letter to the Thessalonians we heard,
'Encourage one another and build each other up.'

In another passage it says,
"Encourage each other every day."

To encourage means to lift someone's spirit, or to strengthen someone's heart.

Doesn't that sound like something we should all be doing a lot of?

It's sad but true that some people can find more encouragement in a bar than they do in a church.

A bar or a pub is dispensing the spirit of alcohol instead of the spirit of God, but it can often provide a permissive and accepting fellowship.

Pubs and bars flourish, not because everybody is an alcoholic, but because God put the desires to know and be known; to find and to give acceptance in every human heart.

In England there is a major brewery called Courage. Everyone knows the effects of taking liquid courage. Unfortunately, as most of us have experienced on more than one occasion, as your sense of courage goes up, your sense of good judgment goes down in inverse proportion.

Football teams have known for a long time what a difference it makes to be encouraged, and cheerleaders and fans are there to enthusiastically provide that encouragement.

Anyone who has ever been a coach, or a teacher, or a team leader has seen, first hand, how well people respond to encouragement.

Encouragement comes down to showing people we care about them, showing them that we think they are important and valuable.

I once heard someone say: "Flatter me and I may not believe you. Criticize me and I may not like you.

Ignore me and I may not forgive you.

But encourage me, and I will never forget you."

Everyone appreciates encouragement.

Indeed everyone thrives on it. It's like giving water to a tired plant with drooping leaves and seeing how quickly it picks up.

This week we honor veterans who have served their country. Studies have shown that soldiers in conflicts draw their strength from the bonds of camaraderie and friendship with their fellow soldiers, more than from their sense of patriotism, or the rightness of the cause.

Everyone needs encouragement.

The personal effects of President Lincoln, which were in his pockets on the night that he was murdered, are on display at the Smithsonian.

Along with a small pocket knife and a confederate five dollar bill, there was a worn out newspaper clipping. This article, extolled the accomplishments of President Lincoln.

The paper clipping looks weathered and had obviously been unfolded and refolded many times. No doubt Lincoln took it out and read it whenever he felt he needed his spirits lifted.

Recall a time when you felt dejected and when someone helped to lift you out of the doldrums.

Recall a time when you know that what you said or did helped someone else to get through a difficult experience.

The Church is often described as a family, and rightly so. We are the people of God, brothers and sisters in Christ, adopted as the children of the heavenly Father.

There are many worthy organizations, such as the Red Cross or Rotary and being a part of those is a good vehicle for being of service.

But the Church is the only organization that was intended by the Lord to be a family, a family whose very charter tells us that we should love one another, forgive one another and encourage one another.

As Christians we need encouragement to be faithful. We need encouragement to rise above temptation. We need encouragement to go through some of the hard times that life throws at us.

There are people who are no longer active attending members of our church, because of their health. I'm

grateful for our ministry of Lay Eucharistic visitors, who take them home communion; and other members who visit the sick to lift their spirits.

It is very easy for people who are stuck at home, or in a nursing home to feel lonely and forgotten, and to wonder if anybody cares.

I'd like to think that we do all care and are concerned for them. But if we're not actively making a point of showing them that we care, they will feel like we don't.

To be an encourager is not a recommendation for us. It is a direct order from God and an excellent way to put into action the commandment to love your

neighbor. 'Encourage one another and build each other up.'

Encouragement is great medicine.

It has a stimulating uplifting effect, without any dangerous side effects. It is free.

It costs nothing to give it away, yet it is a powerful tonic. Everybody needs it, and everybody can provide it.

Some people here take the time to send cards of encouragement to others, and more power to you.

Good job.

In an era where letter writing is becoming a lost art, being replaced with memo style emails and four word text messages, cards and letters of encouragement have a vital task to perform -

to give hope, courage and support to friends and family.

Some people have an active ministry through St. George and some do not. But everyone can undertake a ministry of encouragement.

It begins with a decision - a decision that says, "Yes, I want to spread hope, good spirits and encouragement.

I want people to know they are valued and appreciated. I want to see people lifted up, and by God, I'm going to do that."

Everyone, regardless of their age or health, can participate in a ministry of encouragement.

If you think that sounds like something you could do, and you want to take your part in a ministry of encouragement, let me hear you say,

'Amen'.