

The Gift of Encouragement  
 First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee  
 12/8/13

Romans 15:4-13

For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope. 5 May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, 6 so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

7 Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. 8 For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the circumcised on behalf of the truth of God in order that he might confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, 9 and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written,

“Therefore I will confess you among the Gentiles,  
 and sing praises to your name”;

10 and again he says,

“Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people”;

11 and again,

“Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles,  
 and let all the peoples praise him”;

12 and again Isaiah says,

“The root of Jesse shall come,  
 the one who rises to rule the Gentiles;  
 in him the Gentiles shall hope.”

13 May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

THE GIFT OF ENCOURAGEMENT

I have some bad news for you.

There are only 17 shopping days left until Christmas. (I see the panic on some of your faces. Why are we here? Shouldn't we be out shopping?)

But, I also have some good news. I have a gift idea. Let me give you some hints as to what this gift might be.

It's a gift that everyone wants. It's a gift that never wears out.

It's a gift that keeps on giving. It is a gift that is far more important than any of us can imagine.

And here's the good part. It's a gift that costs us nothing except time and thoughtfulness.

What is this miracle gift?

Well, I sort of spoiled the surprise with my sermon title.

You know what it is. That's right. It's the gift of encouragement.

#### CHANGED BY ENCOURAGEMENT

I don't know about you, but when I look back on my life I realize that the gift of encouragement has meant more to me than any other gift. My life has literally been changed for the better because at various critical times someone has given me a word of encouragement.

The Apostle Paul in his letters often mentions how the encouragement of the various congregations was important to him and gave him strength.

I know what he meant. Without your gracious encouragement and support, I could not serve as your pastor. Many of you continue to lift me up, and I appreciate it more than you know.

I'll bet some of you have had the same experience when it comes to encouragement. I'll bet many of you can attribute much of your success in life to the fact that someone sought to pick you up when you were down.

Or maybe someone pointed out a personal strength and said,

“You should really try to make this skill that you have into a career.”

I'll bet that as I say this many of you are thinking of a specific person who encouraged you along the way.

## INTERPRETING THE WORD

And in today's lesson from Romans we learn that encouragement is more than just a good human characteristic. It is at the heart of the gospel.

The gospel is "good news" because it is a word of encouragement.

The Bible is God's Word. Many people would agree with that statement.

But, the more important and difficult question is how do we interpret the Bible?

What is the guiding principle that should be applied to biblical interpretation? What is the purpose of Scripture?

Some people read Scripture to win arguments.

Certainly Paul used to read Scripture in that way. He began his career as an overenthusiastic religious bigot.

He thought that his interpretation of the Hebrew Scriptures was the only right one. And he persecuted any who disagreed with him.

And then Paul met Jesus on the road to Damascus, and that changed everything. Paul suddenly realized that he was persecuting God and God's people in the name of God and God's people!

In a heartbeat, Paul changed his view of Scripture.

He no longer saw Scripture as a way to prove his own point of view or justification for getting back at his enemies.

## A WORD OF ENCOURAGEMENT

Instead, Paul saw Scripture as a means of grace. Scripture was God's way of bringing salvation and forgiveness to God's people.

Instead of excluding people, Scripture was to be used as way to include and welcome people.

That is still the purpose of Scripture. Scripture was written to encourage us and give us hope.

In verse 4 of today's lesson we read, "For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope."

Many people try to turn the good news into good advice. They see Scripture as a set of rules and regulations.

And there are indeed rules and regulations in the Bible, but Scripture teaches us that even the best among us are not able to follow God's rules, God's law. In fact, the purpose of the law was to teach us just how hopeless things were for us.

But, what the law couldn't do God's word of grace accomplished. God reached down and touched us with the human hand of Jesus. God lifted us up.

Through Jesus God encouraged us. God forgave us. And since our sins are forgiven, we are freed to live in a new way. We have hope.

And so every week when I preach I try to answer one question. How can I use this passage to encourage God's people? That is the primary question that I need to answer. And if I do not answer that question I have failed in my task as a preacher.

I had a professor who used to say with a twinkle in his eye, "God's not out to *get* anyone."

I believe that is profoundly true. God is not out to condemn the world. God is out to save the world. (John 3:16-17)

That is the Christmas message.

That is the word of encouragement that the world desperately needs to hear.

That is the word of encouragement that we desperately need to hear.

## THE STEADFAST GOD OF ENCOURAGEMENT

Our Scripture tells us that the reason the Bible is a word of encouragement is that it comes from a God who is by nature encouraging. In verse 5 God is described as the God of “steadfastness and encouragement.”

God did not create the world and then abandon that world. God continues to support, uphold and encourage His beloved creation.

In theology we refer to this as the Providence of God.

Our love is fickle. But, in contrast, God’s love is steadfast. Underneath creation are the everlasting arms that support and guide us all...all the days of our life and beyond.

There are three things that the Bible tells us about God’s steadfast love.

First, the Bible tells us that the steadfast love of the Lord is from “everlasting to everlasting.” In other words God’s love is eternal. (Psalm 103:17) God’s love is not limited by time or space. God’s love is forever.

Second, the Bible tells us that the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases. In other words God’s love never gives up on us. (Lamentations 3:22) God is like the Father in the parable of the Prodigal Son. God waits for us to come home because God loves us.

And third, the Bible tells us that the earth is full of God’s steadfast love. (Psalm 33:5)

In other words, God’s steadfast love and encouragement are not just for our little part of the world.

God’s love is for the whole world. There is no place on earth that can hide from the steadfast love of God.

## ENCOURAGEMENT FOR THE WORLD

Jesus made this very clear in his actions and in his teachings.

God’s kingdom did not stop at the border of the Promised Land. God’s grace was not limited by geography. God’s grace was not limited by race.

In fact God's grace was not limited by anything.

The surprising (and for many infuriating) thing about Jesus' ministry was that he kept bringing his words of encouragement and salvation to places where they thought it shouldn't go.

Jesus encouraged friends and enemies alike. Jesus healed hometown folk and foreigners. Jesus ate with the religious elite, and he ate with sinners and tax collectors.

The grace of God as revealed in Jesus was shocking in its scope. But, that's how it worked with God's kingdom.

In our lesson for today Paul points out that the God of encouragement was out to preach good news not only to the circumcised but also to the Gentiles, the nations.

According to Paul the ministry of Jesus represented a fulfillment of a message given by the prophet Isaiah. Isaiah imagined a Messiah, a "root of Jesse" who would come to rule the Gentiles as well as the Jews. And his rule would be established by a word of hope for all peoples. (Romans 15:12)

In order to really understand the gospel, we must understand that it is a word of hope for everyone. We cannot limit the gift of encouragement and hope to just our people.

It is for the world. And the only way to keep the gift of encouragement alive is to give it away.

God gave us this gift, this word of encouragement so we can share it with others. Good news is for sharing. It is our job to bring peace and harmony and joy into the world. It is our job to bring light into the darkness.

## AN ENCOURAGING LIFE

This past week at the age of 95 Nelson Mandela died. Many people have reflected upon his example of peace and courage in the most difficult of circumstances. He was unjustly jailed for 27 long years.

But, when he got out of jail he did something extraordinary. He did not choose to nurse his anger or retaliate against his enemies. He realized that he would never be free if he did that.

Instead he sought to bring healing and forgiveness. He encouraged people by his example.

ESPN reported on an event that illustrated how Mandela did that.

When Apartheid ended the world rugby championships were held in South Africa. The South African rugby team was all white and represented to many the oppression of the previous government.

But, Mandela encouraged the rugby team. He wanted them to win for all South Africans, black and white.

The team visited the place where Mandela was imprisoned and gained a better understanding of what he had gone through. And through an improbable series of victories the team made it to the final game.

Nelson Mandela was at that game wearing the team's colors and so were thousands of white and black fans. When the South African Team won in overtime, it was more than a great sports victory.

It was a time when a nation came together.

All this and much more happened because one man knew how to encourage others. And even through many mourned the death of this 95-year-old leader; they also celebrated and gave thanks.

That's the power of encouragement. It truly is a gift that keeps on giving.

## SONS AND DAUGHTERS OF ENCOURAGEMENT

A man named Barnabas accompanied Paul on many of his early missionary journeys. Do you know what that name, Barnabas means? It means "son of encouragement."

I think we need more people named Barnabas. I think we need more sons and daughters of encouragement. I think we need more people who go

around encouraging others. I think we need more people who go around spreading the word of God's grace by what they say and by what they do.

We might think that our words of encouragement often fall on deaf ears. We might think that what we say or do will make little difference.

But, I believe that God's Word still has the power to encourage those who are down. God's Word still has the power to bring hope to those who see no way out.

After Paul met Jesus on the Damascus Road he could never look at Scripture in the same way. Every passage came alive with the power of God's Spirit as revealed by Jesus Christ. Every word contained a message of joy and peace.

The Word that became flesh became a part of Paul's flesh and blood experience. It became a gift that encouraged him and gave him hope in even the most difficult circumstances.

We too have met the Lord. We too know that God was in Christ. We too know that the Spirit of Christ is in us.

And so we do not take God's Word lightly. We listen to Scripture and trust that in that Divine Word we too will find hope and encouragement.

And for the same reason we do not take our words lightly either.

Our words by the power of the Spirit can become words of hope and encouragement to the people that we meet.

In God's hands our words of hope and encouragement can become gifts to the world, gifts that bring harmony and peace where once there was discord and strife.

It seems to me that today's lesson is very practical and "doable."

I challenge you in this season of gift giving to give one more gift.

Give the gift of encouragement. Take the time to lift someone up in the name of God. Take time to sow the seeds of hope.

My charge for you today is to encourage one another with the words of God's grace, the words of Scripture.

And my benediction for you today is the one that Paul gave to the Romans long ago.

“May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.”

Amen.