

“Unleashing an Encouraging Army”

Hebrews 10:19-25

Series: Encouragement, Week 4

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Oh, don't mind me (as I march in place)...I'm just trying to get in my steps. Because I have one of these now - a fitness tracker! A Charge 3 Fitbit to be exact. Many of you have one too...that's in part why I thought I better get one too...peer pressure and all. I asked for it for Christmas. It provides me with all kinds of information designed to help me take better care of myself. And, I have to tell you...It is about the WORST gift I ever got. And I asked for it! Seriously, it's discouraging! I wake up in the morning to find my sleep score was only a 72 – that's a “C” and I feel even more tired. I've learned I'm not drinking enough water. I've burned off about a tic-tacs worth of calories. And every so often I get a little prompt - a zzzt on my wrist and, oh look....I've got 7,342 steps to go before I reach my daily goal just when I'm ready to put my p.j.s on to attempt to get that not so great sleep.

Now I could consider all this positive - all the nudging to help me be my best self. But honestly? Sometimes I just want to take it off. Because I don't always want to be held accountable...do you? Do we want people pointing out where we've fallen short, where we should have taken another flight of steps? Highlighting ways we've not lived up to expectations, ways we need to do things better or more? We want to make long lasting change in our lives but we don't have to tell anyone do we? We don't want anyone to know in the event we backslide. That would be embarrassing. We feel like failures. We are failures...but here's some encouraging news: we've got plenty of company. February is right around the corner and it marks that time that 80% of us who made a resolution on January 1st to make a change, will give up and go back to the old way of doing things.

It's not only hard to be on the receiving end of encouragement, sometimes it's hard to give it because we don't know if it will be received in the spirit it's given. When I was teaching my daughter to ride a bike, as I was running alongside her holding the seat and yelling “pedal, keep pedaling, great job!” She jumped off the bike, turned to me and said: Will you stop shouting “Hurray! Hurray!” What I thought was encouragement, and bolstering confidence in her to keep pedaling, she heard as discouragement – too much pressure. Something similar happened to me and Pastor Doug, who encouraged me many years ago to start writing a column for our monthly newsletter, The Woodside Word (may it rest in peace) I started writing in 2003 and by coincidence? Maybe not. But it just so happened that as we were cleaning out files in the office this past week and we came across paper copies of the newsletter and all those columns I wrote. When we stopped producing the newsletter, I didn't write much – at all. But Doug kept nudging me, and nudging me, and finally, I said something that was very hard for me to say and probably hard for him to hear. I asked him to stop because when he gave me that little zzt – it made me feel guilty I wasn't writing. I know it was not at all what he intended. But it's what I heard.

We are on the 4th and final week of our sermon series Encouragement in which we've studied the life of Barnabas, whose name actually means Son of Encouragement. He's been our model for how to be an encourager. We've learned that encouragement is much more than words of praise but means literally to put courage or strength into another for a purpose. Barnabas did

that for the apostle Paul, so much so that Paul was encouraged and had the courage to write most of the New Testament and start countless churches. We've discussed how it's essential for encouragers to develop discovery listening - that is listening to the other person without giving advice or anecdotes but rather to help the person talking to discover their own answers. Last week we saw how hurts and resentments in relationships can cause blockages but true encouragers work through blockages in relationships by building bridges. Which made me a little uncomfortable – you see there's a relationship in my life right now that needs a bridge over a blockage. And I'm struggling to make that happen.

And today we will explore the impact we, as a church full of Barnabases, could have – the difference we could make - not only for this church but for the kingdom of God.

We're going to do that by looking at a passage from the book of Hebrews, which is considered to be the best New Testament commentary on the Old Testament and its relationship to Jesus Christ (LifeChange Commentary on Hebrews). We don't actually know who wrote it: it has suggested it was Barnabas, perhaps Paul. All that is certain is the author was thoroughly familiar with the Jewish religious system and that it was written for and to a group of Hebrew Christians maybe 40 - 50 years after the resurrection who were experiencing a time of persecution. And they are discouraged. And back sliding. Going back to their old habits and old rituals that were required under the Old Covenant and no longer embracing the freedom they found in Jesus.

The passage we are looking at is Chapt. 10:19-25 which is subtitled "A Call to Persevere."

"Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, 10:19-22a

Okay, I'm going to stop here to look at just this section to pick it a part a bit:

Whenever a passage starts with "Therefore" scholars suggest we explore what it's "there for". In this case the author of Hebrews, in the chapters prior to this, has been reminding, and reiterating the tenants of Grace. That Jesus, as the perfect sacrifice on the cross, once and for all means God doesn't hold our sin against us.

In verse 10:12 we read: "But when this Priest (Jesus) had offered for all time one sacrifice for sin, he sat down at the right hand of God."

In verse 10:17 the author writes that now God essentially says: "Their (the Hebrew Christians) sins (and ours) and lawless acts I (God) will remember no more. And where these have been forgiven there is no longer any sacrifice for sin."

We need to remember that prior to Jesus saving work on the cross, God was considered to dwell in the temple, which could only be entered by a High Priest, one day a year, the Day of Atonement, after animal sacrifices and ritual cleansing. No one else could go in there, so even when the High Priest went in they tied a rope around his ankle. In case he should faint or worse die in there, he could be dragged out by the rope. And the sacrifice was never done. These sacrifices had to be repeated year after year.

I think it's important for us to remember, this Old Covenant that was believed and practiced for thousands of years. And these new Christians, these Hebrew Christians as believers in Jesus Christ are they themselves making a great sacrifice. Once they embraced Jesus gift of grace they were considered unclean, expelled from their synagogues, possibly even imprisoned. So things are tough. They have not only been ignoring the nudges from their fitbits they've probably taken them off.

So the author of Hebrews, comes alongside and essentially says: Keep pedaling! Don't go back to the old way of doing things.

I recently decided to re-straighten my teeth with Invisalign. Though I wore braces many years ago after a while, when you stop wearing your retainers and your teeth will go back to being crooked. But what started to happen to me was that my top and bottom front teeth were so misaligned they had begun to crack off. The treatment is progressive – so each week I change the tray and my teeth move a little more toward the ultimate goal of proper alignment. I'm not wearing them now because honestly they make me talk a little funny. They make my teeth a little sore. And they involve a good bit of maintenance. I was advised to keep each retainer so that if ending up not keeping up with the tenants of my treatment and my teeth were not moving as they should, I need to go back to a previous week before I can move forward. My orthodontist is confident I will get the desired results. But, when it's all said and done I will need to wear a retainer, at least at night, if I want to keep my teeth properly aligned for the rest of my life.

The author of Hebrews essentially takes his audience back a tray and reminds them as a result of what they know about Jesus, they should have confidence.

"Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have *confidence* to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus..." Hebrews 10:19a

Confidence breaks down to "con" meaning with, and fide, meaning with trust or faith. Words like fiduciary, an individual who has the trust and confidence of another to manage or protect her money, and confidant, a close and trusted friend to whom you can tell secret matters of importance are related words.

The author tells them to have confidence that because of Jesus, we can enter into God's presence anywhere, anytime.

Remember the author explained at great length, in previous chapters, what was required of the Old Covenant with God is no longer required, and so now goes on to answer the "So what?" question that Biblical author Thomas Long says should be the question every sermon sparks in the listeners mind. "So what does this mean for us?"

Throughout these next passages he spells it out with statements of encouragement, each one beginning with "Let Us"

"Let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings,"

Notice, he doesn't say here's what you guys need to do. Here's what I want you to do. He's right there with them. Therefore, brothers and sisters. He reminds them they are a community, a family. He reminds them, us: We are all in this together. As believers in Jesus Christ, not one of us is alone. We're on the same team. Which is why it's so important to be connected to a body of believers, a church. I hear people say God is everywhere, I don't need to go to church. I can

worship where I am. It's true God is everywhere. But please don't believe you don't need to be connected to a church family.

Here at Woodside we host a quarterly Recovery Worship service, where those seeking recovery from addiction gather together with friends and family to encourage each other. Another part of the Recovery ministry is visiting and leading worship in prison and helping individuals who have been in prison after they are released. Statistically, a former inmate is 85% more likely to go back to prison if he or she don't get involved with a faith based community. If they do, the rate of recidivism drops to 10%. There is power in community.

Pixar is a hugely successful film company responsible for the Toy Story movies among many others. From its beginnings as a production company, Pixar has focused on the crucial value of teamwork and collaboration. Originally, the company planned to build three separate buildings with separate office spaces for the animators, computer programmers, and management. But Steve Jobs, who was a majority shareholder, scrapped that plan and instead moved everyone into an old canning factory that had one huge room with an atrium in the center. Jobs wanted to create a space where people throughout the company could bump into each other, deepen relationships, and share ideas.

But Jobs took it one step further: he moved everything—including mailboxes, meeting rooms, a coffee bar, and even the bathrooms—into the center of the atrium so people would be forced to interact. Initially, some of the employees complained that it was a waste of time to walk to the atrium every time they had to go to the bathroom or grab a cup of coffee. But Jobs kept telling Pixar employees, "Everybody has to run into each other." A Pixar producer called it "smooshing," and he added, "If I don't see lots of smooshing, I get worried."

At first the atrium seemed like a waste of space ... But Steve [Jobs] realized that when people run into each other, when they make eye contact, things happen. So he made it impossible for you not to run into the rest of the company." It's no surprise, then, that the Latin motto for Pixar says it all: *Alienus Non Diutius*, or "alone no longer."

When we gather for worship, when we interact with each other, we encourage each other. I believe it's truly essential to what the author tells us to do next:

"Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful."

Unswervingly, without wavering. That is not easy to do when you are in the trenches facing trials. When we are tempted to go back to the old way of what we were doing because it's familiar. We can lose sight of the big picture.

I love puzzles. There's one in progress on my kitchen table right now. When I begin working on a puzzle I have the picture on the box as my guide. I know how the finished puzzle will look. I start with the easy stuff. Find all the end pieces and frame it out. Then I start on the area it seems I will be most likely to complete. As I work on it sometimes I get really frustrated. I can't find a piece that seems so obvious. Or maybe the pieces are so similar it's hard to differentiate. Sometimes I have to stand up and look down at the puzzle from a distance to give me a different perspective. Sometimes I have to walk away. But I hold unswervingly to my hope that all the pieces are in the box. If I didn't why would I do the puzzle? What would be the point.

We know what the end of this puzzle of life looks like. For Christians, for believers, for us, Jesus put the missing piece in place through His life, death and resurrection.

The author concludes with: “And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.”