

## “Builders of Encouragement”

“Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.”

*“You know, Jeff, we need spectators too”* – the words that marked the end of my futile attempts at an athletic career. Sports were a big part of life in my hometown, and ever since I can remember people told me that I would be great at basketball because of my height. For a long time, I tried to live up to this encouragement; but I soon discovered that height and talent are not necessarily a package deal. I tried for years to get better at basketball; but sadly, my attempts never resulted in my being even a mediocre player. I tried many other sports but found out that I was not good at them either. After years of fruitless attempts at finding a sport that would suit me, the coach took me aside and uttered those fateful words that finally brought an end to my participation in sports of any kind. I moved from the field to the stands, where I have been ever since.

It took me years after that day of disappointment to discover that my coach wasn’t being flippant or condescending, because spectators and audiences play a vital role in encouraging those who are striving to do their best on stage or on the field of play. I have experienced such encouragement when I finally found some things at which I was proficient: singing with church, school, and community choirs; acting in plays and musicals; and even preaching. The applause and encouragement of the audience is a big factor in encouragement and support; hearing the audience applaud a performance (or at times shouting “amen” during or after a sermon) goes a long way in boosting the confidence of those who are offering their gifts and talents on behalf of others. It continues St. Paul’s exhortation to the Christians at Thessalonica to *“encourage one another and build up each other, as you are doing”* (1 Thessalonians 5:11).

In the fifth chapter of what is probably the earliest of Paul’s letters in the New Testament, the Apostle continues his teaching on “the day of the Lord” (*Parousia*) and the importance of that future day for believers in the present day. The “day of the LORD” (*yom Yahweh*) was the day of the LORD’s vindication of the righteous and judgment of the unrighteous in the Hebrew Scriptures:

- “The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood, before the great and terrible day of the LORD comes.” – Joel 2:31
- “Alas for you who desire the day of the LORD! Why do you want the day of the LORD?” – Amos 5:18
- “Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the LORD

comes.” – Malachi 4:5

Paul uses this well-known Hebrew phrase to distinguish the believers from the unbelievers with respect to how believers can already celebrate their vindication even as they await the day of the Lord being fulfilled. He begins by teaching his readers “*concerning the times and the seasons*” that those who are in Christ “*do not need to have anything written to you*” (5:1). A phrase that originally appears in Old Testament apocalyptic literature (“*He changes times and seasons, deposes kings and sets up kings; he gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to those who have understanding*” – Daniel 2:21), in the New Testament the phrase was understood as referring to the time of God’s judgment (“*It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority*” – Acts 1:7). Paul’s audience of believers already knows well the manner in which the time of judgment will come in a surprising manner, “*like a thief in the night.*” (5:2), a well-known motif in apocalyptic traditions in the New Testament:

- “But know this: if the owner of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have let his house be broken into. You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.” – Luke 12:39-40.
- “Remember then what you received and heard; obey it, and repent. If you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come to you.” – Revelation 3:3.

Paul distinguishes those who look for “the day of the Lord” as the time and season of their redemption from those who believe that “*there is peace and security*” (5:3), a propaganda slogan of the Roman imperial government. The contrast between placing one’s trust in the Lord vs. placing trust in human authorities is clear: trusting in even the most powerful empire of the time will result in “*sudden destruction ... as labour pains come upon a pregnant woman, and there will be no escape!*”; “labour pains” is another phrase Paul borrows from apocalyptic literature, identifying the ordeal that many will experience in the end times (“*For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. This is but the beginning of the birth pangs.*” – Mark 13:8).

But Paul clearly distinguishes the fate of those who trust in human authorities from those who place their trust in the Lord Jesus Christ, for those who are “beloved” are “*not in darkness, for that day to surprise you like a thief; for you are all children of light and children of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness.*” (5:4-5). Because darkness is not a part of their existence, believers will not be surprised on the day of the Lord because they are “children of light” and “children of the day,” who in Christ have turned from the darkness to the “*life [that] was the light of all people*” (John 1:4), and who are called to walk as children of the light that “*shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it*” (John 1:5).

- “For once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light – for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true. Try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord. Take no part in unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them.” – Ephesians 5:8-11.

By contrast, unbelievers are in darkness and have only darkness as the source of their existence (“*And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil.*” – John 3:19).

Paul’s focus shifts to the behavior required of believers as he encourages his readers to “*not fall asleep as others do but let us keep awake and be sober*” (5:6). Living faithfully as a child of the light requires vigilance, that one keep awake and be sober in anticipation of the coming of the day of the Lord:

- “Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is not the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armour of light; let us live honourably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarrelling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provisions for the flesh, to gratify its desires.” – Romans 13:11-13.

Those who live in integrity with what they believe, who “belong to the day,” will put on “*the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation*” (5:8), faith, love, and hope are the church’s “weaponry for eschatological battle” (Helmut Koester). It is through these gifts of faith, love, and hope that believers can live in assurance that “*God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ*” (5:9); for “*God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him*” (John 3:17). Because of God’s initiative in the one “*who died for us,*” believers live in the sure and certain hope that “*whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him*” (5:10), a hope that Paul would share in his letter the Romans:

- “We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s.” – Romans 14:7-8.

A church that is vigilant in its faith in the blessed hope of Christ’s resurrection and its blessed assurance that the day of the Lord will be a day of blessedness and vindication must also be a community that seeks to “*encourage one another and build up each other, as you are doing*” (5:11). As the church is the “house of living stones” that has been “*built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ*” (1 Peter 2:5), Christians are called to continue to work of building up one another so that the house into which we are built might be a place where God’s people

continue “*proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light*” (1 Peter 2:9), recognizing that “*we are God’s servants, working together; you are God’s field, God’s building.*” (1 Corinthians 3:9).

- “For a church facing the painful ordeals of alienation, these words about a distinctive life likely provided a source of comfort. With little wonder it is, then, that Paul gives direct attention to his words at the closing of one of the sections: ‘Comfort one another with these words.’” – Abraham Smith.

The work of encouraging and building up the Body of Christ in faith is an essential element of the community that Christ has called together and has entrusted with his Holy Word. In his letter to the Ephesians, the Apostle encourages his audience to “*lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace*” (Ephesians 4:1-3), while he exhorts the Philippians to “*do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves.*” (Philippians 2:3). He teaches the Corinthians that “*love builds up*” and that the love of God that is ours in Christ Jesus our Lord “*bear all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things*” (1 Corinthians 8:1, 13:7). The church that is rooted in the Gospel of Jesus Christ is a church that all times must “*keep alert, stand firm in your faith, be courageous, be strong. Let all that you do be done in love.*” (1 Corinthians 16:13-14).

- “Love is stronger than death, and community is the place where you and I continue to let the world know that there is something to celebrate, something to be joyful about, something to be ecstatic about – ecstasy, *exstasis*, in the sense of moving out of the static place of death. Community is the place from which we speak the Good News to the world: ‘Don’t be afraid. Look, it has already happened. Christ is risen.’” – Henri Nouwen.

A community whose mission is to encourage and build up one another is at the heart of the Church’s identity. Christianity has always been a communal faith, never an individualistic pursuit. Jesus’ first act after his Temptation is to gather disciples, who accompany him throughout his ministry. While there are times where he withdraws to quiet places for prayer and reflection, Jesus always returns to his disciples and his people. He chooses to name this gathering of believers *church*, which means “assembly,” and commissions his apostles to “*make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit*” (Matthew 28:19). When we are baptized in God’s holy name, we are incorporated into this assembly: “*by water and the Holy Spirit we are reborn children of God and made members of the church, the body of Christ. Living with Christ and in the communion of saints, we grow in faith, love, and obedience to the will of God.*” (ELW Holy Baptism). We are blessed with the ties that bind our heart in Christian love in a community in which we “*bear one another’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.*”

(Galatians 6:2). The community that is gathered in Christ is the beloved community in which we “*share our mutual woes, our mutual burdens bear, and often for each other flows the sympathizing tear.*” (ELW Hymn 656).

- “Christianity means community through Jesus Christ and in Jesus Christ. No Christian community is more or less than this ... What does this mean? It means, first, that a Christians needs others because of Jesus Christ. It means, second, that a Christian comes to others only through Jesus Christ. It means, third, that in Jesus Christ we have been chosen from eternity, accepted in time, and united in eternity.” – Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*.

Our worship gatherings – both in-person and online – are not gatherings of mere spectators who passively observe the work of others; “liturgy” is the “work of the people,” and all of us plan an essential role as active spectators who gather to encourage one another in our mutual ministry as the Body of Christ. Our ministry of encouragement plays a key role in many of our important worship events:

- When we celebrate the Sacrament of Holy Baptism, we are challenged as “*people of God, do you promise to support these children and pray for them in their new life in Christ?*”
- When those same children affirm their baptismal promises at Confirmation, the assembly is challenged to “*support these sisters and brothers and pray for them in their life in Christ.*”
- When we gather to celebrate a marriage in which two people pledge love and faithfulness to each other, the congregation is again asked “*will all of you, by God’s grace, uphold and care for [them] in their life together?*”
- “The church is to be a place of encouragement; it’s the best place God made for love and encouragement, real spiritual community that is alive, well, and encouraging ... If we do this it would change us dramatically, and our relationship with each other would blossom. This is what God wants for us in his Church.” – George MacDonald.

I never became a good athlete, but I am a rather good spectator. I attended all my high school’s football games and many other athletic events. I cheer for my favourite teams, and when I attend a concert or play, I always cheer for the actors so that they can feel my encouragement and appreciation. I know how important it is to be encouraging because I have experienced the power of encouragement that has built me up when I am feeling low and given me the strength to go forward when my inner resources are depleted. God has called us into the community of the Church so that we might be builders of encouragement, supporting and uplifting one another so that our Lord might be glorified and so that God’s mission might be fulfilled among us, so that all might be encouraged in these challenging

times to know that God is with us always and the nothing can separate us from the love of God that is ours in Christ Jesus our Lord.

- “Lift up your eyes beyond anxieties and ills to God whose glory exceeds the starry skies, building each other up in faith and joy. Amen.” – Bruce Prewer.

May we always be a community of encouragement, building each other up and cheering each other on in our mission to share the love of God and shine the light of Christ’s love everywhere we go!

Amen.