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Isaiah 35:4-7a, Mark 7:24-37
Encouraging One Another

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My text is from our First Lesson, from Isaiah Chapter 35. It speaks of the strength and encouragement we are able to lend to one another:

⁴Say to those who are of a fearful heart, “Be strong, fear not! Behold, your God will come...” (Isaiah 35:4, RSV)

Isaiah is referring to a downhearted people -- the people of Israel who have languished in Babylonian Captivity for two generations. Perhaps to taunt them, or perhaps simply because they loved to hear Jewish music, their Babylonian captives would ask the Israelites to sing. But after being captives for so long, they could hardly bring themselves to sing any more. In Psalm 137, they pour out their hearts about this:

¹By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion.

²We hanged our harps upon the willows in the midst thereof.

³For there they that carried us away captive required of us a song; and they that wasted us required of us mirth, saying, Sing us one of the songs of Zion.

⁴How shall we sing the LORD’s song in a strange land? (Psalm 137:1-4, KJV)

What an image of the desolation of the soul this is! Many a person could testify that even in the depths of trouble, they found comfort in music. One must be sunk quite low to hang one’s harp on the willows and to simply sit and weep.

It is to such a downhearted people that the LORD wills that encouragement should be given. Interestingly, the text does not specify who is to comfort the people, whether it is the pastors, the prophets, or simply the people encouraging one another. However it is done, the LORD commands that the time for comforting has come.

The verse just before our assigned reading speaks of hands and knees -- those parts of the body which often reveal the distress of our hearts, as when we wring our hands or fall upon our knees, like Charlie Brown collapsing on the ground,

banging the earth, and shouting “I just can’t take it!” after another disappointment in that poor boy’s life. The LORD wills that the time of such anguish is coming to an end, and so he commands that there should be encouragement proclaimed in his name:

³Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. ⁴Say to those who are of a fearful heart, “Be strong, fear not! Behold, your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God. He will come and save you.”

My goal in this sermon is to raise two questions about encouragement and then to point to the Reason for courage. My questions are, First, who might need encouragement? And second, Who is able to give encouragement to others? I mean to conclude then by pointing to Jesus of Nazareth, for we see in our Gospel Lesson about Jesus a foretaste of the our God who “will come and save you.”

WHO MIGHT NEED ENCOURAGEMENT?

First, who might need encouragement in this world? Naturally, we think first of those who have suffered some blow, perhaps bad news concerning health or finances or vocation or loved ones. Also, we can think of those who have long endured hardship, like the Israelite captives from long ago. In our midst, there might be someone who has been enduring a long season of disappointment. Too long they have been unemployed, too long they have been sick, too long they have been poor till they about worn out by it, too long they have been lonely. Keep your eyes and your ears open for such ones and try to encourage them.

But think also of the strong, for at any particular time in life, even the strong might need your encouragement. Let me give you an example from our own tradition. I mean Martin Luther himself. Luther was a colossus! When he died, his younger colleague Phillip Melancthon broke the news to the students in his Romans class using the words of the prophet Elisha, when his master Elijah was taken up into heaven:

Dead is the charioteer of Israel, who led the church in these last times.
(Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther*, Volume 3, page 378)

Aye, Luther was a giant of man of faith. Yet Luther too knew what it was to have a broken heart, for Luther grieved, they say, for the rest of his days over the death of his thirteen-year old daughter Magdalene:

When his daughter was very ill [Luther] said: “I love her dearly, but if it be thy will, dear God, to take her, I shall be glad to know that she is with thee.” Later, when she was lying in bed, he said to his daughter, “Magdalene, my little daughter, you would gladly remain here with me, your father. Are you also glad to go to your Father who is in heaven?”

And the sick girl replied, “Yes, dear father, as God will.” The father then cried, “My dear daughter!”... When his daughter was in the agony of death, he fell upon his knees before the bed and, weeping bitterly, prayed God might save her if it be his will. Thus she gave up the ghost in the arms of her father. Her mother was in the same room but was farther from the bed on account of her grief.”

Strong people can be intimidating. But strong people might also be hurting and would be glad for your encouragement.

So, the general answer to the question, “Who might need encouragement?” is, Anyone. That one to your left or to your right, they might well profit from a word of encouragement from you.

SECOND, WHO CAN GIVE ENCOURAGEMENT TO OTHERS?

Second, who can give encouragement to others? Answer, you can, even though you might be weak and conscious of sin. To help take this in, recall our Lord’s dealings with Peter. The time of Christ’s crucifixion draws near. It would have been natural for Jesus to be preoccupied with his own fate, but his thoughts seem to be on Peter. Jesus knows that Peter faces a great test. Furthermore, Jesus knows that Peter will fail that test. But Jesus cares so much for Peter that he is able to look beyond that failure, appealing to the man to strengthen his fellow disciples even though Peter himself shall fall. And so, Jesus says this to Peter:

“Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, ³²but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail; and when you have turned again, strengthen your brethren.” (Luke 22:31-32, RSV)

Peter swears that it shall not be so. He swears that he will remain true to Jesus:

And he said unto him, Lord, I am ready to go with thee, both into prison, and to death. (Luke 22:33, KJV)

But, alas, the performance of our poor brother Peter is so disappointing that his threefold denial of our Lord is rehearsed every Good Friday, for centuries now and till Christ comes again. Yet this is the man - this poor man who went out wept at his failure - who is encouraged to “strengthen your brethren.”

Those who rejoice in their sins are not yet ready to strengthen others in a Christian way. But those who are repentant for their sins, even though those sins should be as notorious as Peter’s, nonetheless are urged by Christ to lend a hand to the encouragement of others.

It is a constant apostolic theme that Christians are to support one another:

⁹Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; ¹⁰love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. (Romans 12:9-10, NRSV)

¹I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, ²with all lowliness and meekness, with patience, forbearing one another in love, ³eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. (Ephesians 4:1-3, RSV)

Recently I was invited to teach a course on “Creeds and Confessions” for our synod’s *Diakonia* program, starting this coming January. This mention of the Lutheran Confessions has put me in mind of Luther’s treatise *The Smalcald Articles* (1537) and of his teaching on the means of grace. It is a humbling thing that right next to such high and lofty means of grace as preaching, baptism, eucharist, and confession, Luther places the kind of encouragement that you and I are able to lend to our neighbors through what Luther calls “the mutual conversation and consolation of brethren”:

We shall now return to the Gospel, which offers counsel and help against sin in more than one way, for God is surpassingly rich in his grace: First, through the spoken word, by which the forgiveness of sin (the peculiar function of the Gospel) is preached to the whole world; second, through Baptism; third, through the holy Sacrament of the Altar; fourth, through the power of the keys; and finally, through the mutual conversation and consolation of brethren. Matt. 18:20, “Where two or three are gathered,” etc. (Smalcald Articles, Part III, IV. The Gospel)

Halting and tongue-tied as our words might sometimes be, still they might serve as the very voice of God to some suffering soul, if only we would try.

THE CONTENT OF ENCOURAGEMENT

Let me conclude this sermon on mutual encouragement by pointing to the chief matter: I mean Jesus Christ our Lord, for he is the very content of Christian encouragement. We encouragement one another in various ways, by reminding one another that, say, the beauty of autumn will come, the stock market will regain its strength, the Yankees are in fine shape to win the World Series, and so on. But our encouragement becomes holy and particularly Christian when we try to lift the spirits of others by speaking of Jesus. It is as the hymn says:

In the morning when I rise,
in the morning when I rise,
in the morning when I rise,
give me Jesus.

Refrain

Give me Jesus,
give me Jesus.

You may have all the rest,
give me Jesus. (“In the Morning When I Rise,” *With One Voice*, 777)

And this brings us to today’s Gospel Lesson about the healing of the Syrophenician woman’s daughter and the healing of the man who was deaf and dumb. (Mark 7:24-37) The thing that most touches me about these stories is how needful the healing was, for in both cases, the affliction threatens the ability of the sufferer to enjoy a full human life. I mean, what can be a deeper blow against a human being than to be possessed by a demon, as was the poor child in the first story, and to be denied the ability to participate in language, as was the poor man? That man suffered from a double disability. It is bad enough to be unable to hear, but the misery is compounded if you can understand, yet cannot speak back.

There are mysteries in that first story, the one about the Syrophenician woman, but let me mention that Luther loved that lady! He loved her for her determination, indeed for her willingness to hang in there and to wrestle with Jesus if need be. She has heard good things about Jesus, and she does not mean to leave him until she wins from him victory for her daughter. And she is absolutely right to do so. She is a model for us of persistence in prayer. Without her brave wrestling with Jesus, we might be tempted to give up our hope in Jesus. And if we give up for ourselves, it will be hard for us to encourage others in the name of Jesus. But let your encouragement be strong, as was this woman’s!

Jesus healed her daughter. He did not even need to go to her home to do so. He simply spoke the word and it was so. And in healing the daughter, Jesus was not being convinced to do something he did not want to do. Rather, he was grateful to the mother for her example of persistence in asking him to do something he fully means to do anyway: to seek and to save those who are lost.

This one who healed the daughter, opened the ears of the deaf man, and unloosed his tongue... this One now comes to you and me in this Blessed Sacrament. His words are ever gracious to us. He speaks of his love by which he would rather die than lose us. This is cause of encouragement for you and me and reason to try to lift the spirit of others in the name of Jesus, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.