

September 25, 2005

at Baker Memorial Church

Preaching: Rev. Ronni Verboom

Philippians 2:1-13

“Is there any encouragement in Christ?”

How do you feel about happy endings? When you read a book, see a movie, what do you anticipate as you near the end? My husband, Gilles, REALLY likes happy endings. In fact, that’s why he prefers AMERICAN movies to FRENCH movies, even though they come from his native land. When we watch a movie together, an AMERICAN movie, and for some reason it ends badly, he sometimes explodes: “If I’d wanted to see a FRENCH movie, I would have WATCHED a FRENCH movie!”

I was quite a bookworm growing up. When I was very young, I was content with most of the books I read. I actually liked fairy tales a lot. First, because they were HONEST about life. Life is filled with dangers and fearsome creatures. I think we are all aware of this from earliest childhood. There ARE dark forests; there ARE huge monsters that wish us harm; there ARE evils to do battle with. I think that’s why we like *Harry Potter* and *The Lord of the Rings*. Good people die; bad people get power. It happens in those stories and in happens in our world. But the fairy tales of my early childhood were great, because everything turned out right in the end. As I grew older, more books I read and films I saw had SAD endings. And you know what I started to do? I would REWRITE the endings in my head, so all would turn out the way I wanted. I confess, sometimes I STILL do that.

But, we can’t rewrite REAL LIFE. In THIS world, things don’t always turn out the way we would want. One of the great treasures of our faith, however, is that we have been given the ULTIMATE ending to the story of humanity. We’ve been allowed to read the

last chapter. I confess, I used to do that as a kid, too. If a book's plot became intense, and I was worried about the characters, I couldn't resist. I'd peek ahead. Just to make sure those people were ok at the end of the book. Our faith proclaims that at the end of everything, at the end of history, in the final, REAL, ULTIMATE end of all things, it all comes out all right. LIFE WINS OVER DEATH!! LOVE AND GOODNESS WIN OVER EVIL. God wraps all human experience up, into an ending of peace, joy and delight.

But in the meantime, what do we do? What do we do in the dark forests, where there are scary monsters out to hurt us, and hurt us bad?—where the good people die and bad people get power? – where we try to fight evil, but so often feel outmatched? What do we do?

The apostle Paul, in our Philippians reading for today, has a message for us. Paul knew troubles. He was whipped, beat up, chased out of town, thrown in prison, shipwrecked, nearly drowned, and he had an ailment or habit that tormented him, known to us as his “thorn in the flesh”. This guy knew the dark, scary forests, the monsters, the struggle against evil, both within and without. But he also had wisdom to help us along our way:

If there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love.... Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus....

Paul begins with Christ. If there is any encouragement in Christ.... then live this way, he says. If you ever found Christ's support in an hour of need, if Christ ever brought you refreshment and rest, if

Christ has ever given you the ability to hold on, then..... live like this.

Ok. Is there any encouragement in Christ? IS there? I remember a short story written from the perspective of a little girl. At a Fourth of July family reunion, she noticed one of her aunts. She knew her aunt was battling cancer, and noticed how thin she was getting. She heard her relatives rejoicing about the aunt being “born again”. She was going to church services several times a week. She was being prayed over, and anointed with oil for healing in Jesus’ name. The girl heard all this, looked at her aunt, so painfully thin and pale, and concluded, “Fat lot of good being born again seemed to be doing to her. What good is Jesus after all?” she wondered.

I suspect many of us have moments of wondering and struggling, just like this little girl. Is Christ a help? Has Christ refreshed you in an hour of need, supported you in a time of trial?

The best I can do is to tell you the answer from my own life--- and the answer is yes, Christ has helped me, encouraged me, held me up when I was falling. I didn’t always recognize him at the time, but looking back, that’s how I see it now.

When I was very young, I was often overwhelmed by family arguments and conflicts. I would go outside and feel the comfort of the wind on my skin, the peace of the sun warming me, the joy of the smooth Nebraska dust under my bare feet. And Christ encouraged me.

When I was a shy, awkward teen, not at all sure of myself, I got the lead in my high school play, “The Diary of Anne Frank”. I loved the rehearsals, and was terrified but even loved the performances. The week afterward, I received a letter from a local pastor whom I had never met. He told me he believed God gives us all gifts and that we should use them. He told me he had seen the play, and been deeply moved by my performance. He told me,

“God gave you a gift. Treasure it. Be proud of it. Use it.” And Jesus Christ encouraged me.

When I began my second year of college, I went through a time of deep depression. I didn't know how to ask anyone for help, how to describe what I was feeling. But a friend loaned me some books she had just finished: three books, known as the “Lord of the Rings” by J.R. Tolkien. They presented a battle against darkness, and after a long struggle the LIGHT won. Those books helped me believe in LIGHT again, in a very dark time. Gradually the depression lifted. And Jesus Christ encouraged me.

Through the years, through my church experiences, through reading and discussing the Bible, and matching what I've learned to what I've lived—I have discovered that God is someone I have known all my life. I have come to see how Jesus does love me, support me, refresh me, hold me up and even carry me, and has always done so from the time of my birth.

We can lean on Christ. We do lean on Christ. It helps to know it. It helps to recognize times and ways when that has happened. Christ loves us. We have been encouraged.

Therefore, and here's the advice Paul gives us: Since we are loved and encouraged by Christ, we need to love and encourage others. THIS is how we live, embracing Christ's ministry of encouragement- both receiving and offering it ourselves.

I am not the only one here who has received a ministry of encouragement. I'd like to invite Melissa Pagano, who has something to share from her journey of life and faith.

From Melissa:

Growing up in the church I have always been encouraged to follow my heart. But if I have to give one example of encouragement my thoughts go directly to Rich. Rich has been so many things to me. He has been my youth pastor,

mentor, sounding board, friend, and most important an encouragement to me as well as others. There are 3 examples of how Rich has impacted my time at Baker.

One of the first things I remember is at a youth lock-in. Rich spread a t-shirt onto the floor of the sanctuary and told us all to stand on the shirt at the same time. We tried a few ways, none of which worked. I was getting frustrated and sat down. Rich came up to me and said Melissa, you have more faith than most in this room. You can do this if you think about it. Needless to say we eventually figured it out.

Secondly, my first semester at Judson, I called Rich, upset and confused. Judson is a Baptist school, there is nothing wrong with that, but at the time I thought I entered a different world. God had always been in my life. I just never spoke of my relationship out loud before. It was more the way others saw me present myself, my lifestyle. Rich came out to Judson, sat through a chapel service, and then we talked. I told him my concerns, and he told me it was okay to think those things. But he also told me it was okay to raise my hands to God or to talk openly about my love for the Lord. That it wasn't just the way I looked on the outside but what I felt on the inside too.

Lastly, but most important. The day my brother died, Rich was the one person I needed to talk to. So when I found a way back to my second home, I went to the church. I actually pulled Rich from the 10:30 service and broke down. Even when I was mad and confused at God, I ran to my source of happiness, my source of joy, I went to church.

THIS is how we live, in our world where the endings are not always happy, embracing the ministry of encouragement that God has given us. This is how we live, until God's time comes to its close and the ending **IS** one of peace and joy and delight.

We need to be people who live in the here and now, committed to a ministry of encouragement, encouraging others as Christ encourages us. A lot of the time, we don't, and the world is a darker place for it.

Don't make this task more complicated than it is. There are an infinite number of ways to encourage. **MUSIC** encourages, and we are thankful to receive that special gift from the Purdue Glee Club

today. Reaching across the globe with concern and Christian love constitutes a ministry of encouragement, and we are celebrating that with our guests at the Senegal Consultation this afternoon.

Our world is a dark and scary place. It's a place that NEEDS encouragers. I pray you will find the encouragement and love of Christ in the simple, regular times and places of your life. Then, put yourself in Christ's hands, to be an instrument of his love and encouragement to others.

Don't make this more complicated than it is! Once you place yourself and your love in God's hands, sometimes all you have to do is SHOW UP! Let me share a story that illustrates this:

When I was in seminary I worked as a student chaplain in a hospital. A group of us shared in ministry, rotating among the floors and wards, spending time with patients- listening, sharing, and praying with them. Our supervisor, the head chaplain, told us about one of his students who did her chaplaincy while she was pregnant. She was walking down a corridor when she was suddenly overcome by nausea and weakness. Fearful that she was about to faint, she quietly slipped into the nearest room. She spotted a chair near the patient's bed and sank into it. She was so dizzy, she leaned forward, lowering her head to her knees. She prayed for God's help, and took several deep breaths. Gradually her heart stopped racing, the dizziness and nausea subsided. As her strength returned, she sat up straight. With her hands folded in front of her, she took several more deep breaths. When she was ready, she quietly slipped out of the room.

Later that day, the supervising chaplain happened into that same patient's room. The older woman was thrilled to see him. "Oh, Pastor," she said. "There's a lovely young chaplain who stopped into my room today. I was feeling so despondent, the lowest I've felt yet- after a discouraging meeting with my doctor this morning. I was lying quietly in the dark, when she stepped into my room.

She seemed to know I didn't need chitchat. She didn't say a word, but just bowed her head low and prayed quietly. When she sat up, she prayed in silence a few moments longer. I can't tell you the peace and comfort that brought me! I felt the presence of God's spirit with us right in this room! Please let that young woman know how grateful I am for the time she spent with me."

THIS is the way a ministry of encouragement, rooted in God's love, happens! Even when we aren't aware of it, God can be working through us to encourage others. May the love and encouragement of Christ make all the difference in our lives. And may the Christlike love that encourages others overflow to those around us- starting TODAY! Right away! --continuing through the years of our lives, until God brings his ULTIMATE ENDING of love and light to fulfillment!

AMEN!