

Making the Difference in Someone's Life:
Learning the Ministry of Encouragement
15 Pentecost C

Remember the person that said the perfect thing that boosted your morale and gave you the feeling that you could do anything? It may have been that you felt you could do nothing right but someone found the one thing that you did well.

No book is so bad that you can't get one thing out of it. No sermon is so bad that you can't get one thing out of it. No movie is so bad that you can't get one thing out of it. The 1989 movie "Always", directed by Steven Spielberg, may not have been his best film. But it had one good thing in it. The lead character died in a crash and returned as a ghost to tell the woman he loved, "I loved you. I should have said the words. I should have told you I love you because I know now that the love we hold back is the only pain that follows us here."

Did you hear? "The love we hold back is the only pain that follows us here."

Holding back encouragement can be as painful as holding back love. What of the student who fails his exam and gives up? Who is there but you and me to encourage and lift up the spirit? One such student made a try at being an artist before he entered a life of politics in twentieth century Germany. His name – Adolf Hitler! Having failed at his artistic creativity he created hate for the whole world. Perhaps there is someone in our life who needs a kind word. It may be that talent is not far from anyone who works hard and develops his/her skill.

The choir director of a church once said a kind word to a young man who was filled with fear when called upon to pray. The young man would stammer his way through his prayer. A class on preaching for lay persons was being offered by the pastor. The choir director urged the young man to consider the class by telling him of a story of another man who had been called to preach God's word though he suffered from a speech impediment. The man continued to preach as opportunity was offered him and in time he overcame the impediment. In time, because of such support I went and followed the call to preach that the choir director saw in me. He believed in me when I thought I could never get up and do it.

The brief personal letter of Philemon written by the apostle Paul surprisingly has received a lot of attention from scholars through the

years. Part of the attraction is that while Philemon is quite brief, it is nevertheless the only piece of personal correspondence from Paul that has survived and found its place in the canon. Indeed, the particular and individual nature of Philemon caused some dissent among early church leaders, who wondered if it were not perhaps too personal to be of any great use to the church at large.

Not until St. John Chrysostom suggested a new interpretation of Philemon in the fourth century were all its critics laid to rest. It was Chrysostom who proposed for the first time that Onesimus was a fugitive slave and that Paul was seeking to aid him in his reconciliation with his master Philemon. (See Allen Dwight Callahan, "Paul's Epistle to Philemon: Toward an Alternative Argumentum," *Harvard Theological Review* 86 [1993]: 357-76.)

Others suggest that we force ourselves to examine just what we have before us in the text, a rather different view of this letter can come into focus. This letter is it seems a personal note between Paul and a beloved friend and colleague in the faith, Philemon. The warm personal greetings that open this letter appear to be to the entire household. It is most likely that Apphia, "our sister," is Philemon's own wife. Archippus, "our fellow soldier," is also a full member of the church meeting in Philemon's house. Paul's affection for Philemon is genuine and heartfelt. He remembers him in his prayers, thanks God for him and testifies to Philemon's ongoing love and faith for "the saints" and the Lord Jesus.

What Paul actually says is that he is sending Onesimus back to Philemon, but reluctantly. In Onesimus, Paul has found a spirit and a heart that encourages him and loves him just as Philemon himself does. Onesimus is apparently much like Philemon. Paul confesses to Philemon that he wants to keep Onesimus with him so that Onesimus might "be of service to me in your place." Both men are Paul's "encouragers."

If we do not take Paul's reference of "slave" literally but rather a change in status not of a runaway slave but of a wayward brother, Onesimus is now being returned to his family's household. Whatever status he had endured in his brother's house previously -- and as the younger, unlanded sibling, it may have been quite "slave-like" -- that is to be forgotten. He is now redeemed by Christ's love back into full fraternity.

Whether a sibling, a "brother in Christ" or a literal slave, Paul takes clear steps to reinstate Onesimus as one who should be

received into the family of God because of his service to him. Here we have a wonderful example of the power of such ministry. Paul, old and in chains is telling us how he was ministered to by this young man.

May we be gladdened whenever one of us learns of the ministry of an encouraging word. I recently was encouraged when one of our ill members spoke to me of how blessed she was when one of you brought tea in china cups and scones to this very sick and weary English woman's heart. And so I say to you, be doers of the word and not just hearers.

Someone else among us has taken a homeless man and his children into her home. More of these stories could be told. May we be encouraged by them. And may we encourage one another to good works. Amen.