

**Encouragement to be Faithful
Students of Scripture
First Presbyterian Church
Pittsford, NY 14534
September 28, 2014**



**Fall Encouragement Series
Special Texts and Lectionary:
Acts 9:19-31
Psalm 119:105
Philippians 2:1-13**

1. You know Murphy's Law: If anything can go wrong, it will.
 - a. And, we never run out of things that can go wrong.
 - b. We can all think of our own examples of this law's veracity.
 - i. The other line at Wegmans always moves faster than the one you are in.
 - ii. The chance of the bread falling with the peanut butter side down is directly proportional to the cost of the carpet it is falling toward.
 - iii. No matter how long or hard you shop for an item after you have bought it, you will see it on sale somewhere else cheaper.
 - iv. Any tool dropped while fixing a car will roll underneath to the exact center of the car.
 - v. Planned dates cause pimples.
 - vi. A meeting is an event at which the minutes are kept and the hours are lost.
 - c. According to Murphy, the world is a discouraging place.
 - d. We can debunk that myth.
 - i. Would you like to know how?
 1. We can engage in the spiritual practice of encouragement.
 - a. Is it easy to do?
 - i. Yes!

- ii. And, no.
- b. Encouragement is easy if we're in the habit of doing it.
 - i. It's like water sluicing off a duck's back.
 - ii. But if we're mired in misery like stuck pigs, there is not much sluicing going on – at least not the kind one discusses in polite company.
- c. So in order for us to become more familiar with encouragement, perhaps we should look at what it is.
- ii. The literal definition of En-courage is to "put courage into someone"
- iii. The Greek word we translate as encourage - "paraklesis" – means to come alongside.
 - 1. The Greek word is found in several New Testament passages like
 - a. - 1 Thess 5:11 - Encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.
 - b. - Heb 10:24-25 – Let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another...
 - c. And it is found in the beautiful ancient hymn repeated for us in this morning's lectionary reading from Philippians: 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, being in full accord and of one mind. (Phil: 2:1-2).
 - i. Or to roughly paraphrase the Greek paraklesis here, we would say...
 - ii. If there is any 'coming alongside in Christ' ...make my joy complete.

2. History and literature – both fiction and non-fiction - are replete with examples of people coming alongside to help.
 - a. Among other names, we can call those who come alongside, sidekicks.
 - i. Sidekicks make the world go around.
 - ii. They come to the rescue, figure stuff out before anybody else, and provide much-needed perspective on all the random events comprising life.
 - iii. Even the coolest adventurer is nothing without a sidekick or two.
 - b. Some well-known fictional sidekicks are Sancho Panza (of Don Quixote), Doctor Watson (of Sherlock Holmes), Tonto (of The Lone Ranger), Robin (of Batman), Friday (of Robinson Crusoe), Ethel Mertz (of Lucy Ricardo), Ron and Hermione (of Harry Potter), and Chewbacca (of Han Solo).
 - c. The original sidekick of the early church was Barnabas.
 - i. He came alongside Saul who was also known as Paul (Acts 13:9).
2. Sidekicks like Barnabas can seem like minor characters.
 - a. But without them, the course of history can change.
 - i. In 1491 and early 1492 Christopher Columbus had been to the rulers of Italy, Portugal and Spain seeking support for his voyage of discovery.
 1. All had turned him down.
 2. As he was leaving the castle of King Ferdinand of Spain after being refused again, legend has it that a man on horseback raced after him & called him back.
 3. Queen Isabella had offered to sell her royal jewels to finance the trip.

4. Two weeks from now as we celebrate Columbus Day, thank God for the anonymous rider who came alongside Columbus.
- ii. Consider what might have happened if Barnabas had not convinced the apostles of Saul's authentic Damascus-road conversion.
 1. Paul would not have gone on to evangelize the Corinthians, Philippians, the Ephesians, the Galatians, the Colossians, the Romans and many more by wider circulation of his letters.
- b. Barnabas changed the course of history.
 - i. Through his actions, as we read in Acts 9:31 this morning, "the church throughout Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace and was built up. Living in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it increased in numbers."
- c. We might say that Saul's sidekick gave the early church its much-needed Barnabas bump!
3. How did Barnabas develop such a spirit of encouragement?
 - a. We know only two things about Barnabas' provenance as we read last week in Acts 4:36.
 - i. First, he was a Levite – meaning he was of Jewish heritage descended from one of Jacob's son's, Levi.
 1. Chances are that as a Levite, he was steeped in the Scripture of what we call the Old Testament.
 - ii. And second, the apostles had renamed this man.
 1. Instead of calling him by his given name of Joseph, they called him Barnabas, which means son of encouragement.
 2. Think about it!
 - a. If others were to rename us for our most prominent quality, what would we be called?
 - b. Would our names be Faith, Hope, or Grace?
 - c. Or would they be Cynic, Critic or Busy?

- d. There is a marvelous secretary at Strong Hospital's Kirch Developmental Center named Comfort.
 - i. No kidding – that's what her parents named her.
 - ii. And she completely lives up to her name.
 - iii. She deals with distraught people all day long and consistently, calmly soothes them.
 - iv. I asked her if her name influenced her behavior or if her behavior caused her parents to give her that name.
 - 1. She said she has never known anything different, so she imagines it was a bit of both.
- e. By what name would we want to be known?
- b. Scripture has many examples of people being renamed: Abram and Sarai became Abraham and Sarah, Joseph became Barnabas, Saul became Paul, Simon became Peter, and of course, Jesus became Christ.
 - i. Barnabas likely developed this spirit of encouragement – and consequently his new name – out of his Levite knowledge and reading of Scripture.
- 4. Why should we care about our personally reading scripture?
 - a. Let me ask it this way – do we value reading?
 - i. Of course.
 - ii. Listen to this list of benefits from reading that I found on a classroom poster recently:

Joy

Oh, joy! Getting lost in a book is one of life's greatest pleasures.

Transformation

Reading challenges us to take risks, to consider new perspectives and possibilities, to outgrow our present circumstances and ourselves.

Illumination

Reading illuminates our humanity and expands our circle of knowing and caring.

Communion

The intimate conversation between reader and author—and the language they use in all its magnificent variations.

Imagination

Our life's dreams often begin in the pages of a book that sparks our imagination.

Inspiration

We honor those who connect us, at just the right moment, with the text we need.

Advocacy

We celebrate those who work to help others access books and discover the triumph of reading.

Reading Makes Lives

- b. Now imagine the benefits not just of reading, but of reading scripture.
 - i. I would say that if reading makes lives, then reading scripture makes life worth living.
- c. As an adult, I have chosen to live in Washington DC for graduate school, working for the Federal Government and the lobbying arm of Verizon's predecessor company, Atlanta for Verizon's having moved me there from DC so I could focus on international business deals, Princeton for Seminary, and now Rochester.
 - i. When I was new to Atlanta the year they hosted the 1996 Olympics, I initially knew very few people.
 - ii. In the company cafeteria, I observed one of the maintenance engineers, David, daily reading from his Bible.
 - iii. I asked him one day why he read it every day and he joyously told me what wisdom and satisfaction reading God's word brought him.
 - iv. I had never read the bible all the way through and was intimidated so I asked David where to start.

- v. His answer was so good, it is the answer I pass on to many who have since asked me.
- vi. He said to start with the Psalms and my pick of any one of the gospels.
 - 1. I did and I was hooked.
 - 2. I couldn't put this NYT bestseller down.
- d. Have you ever had this happen to you?
 - i. You are racking your brain for just the right word, you send up a silent prayer, and all of a sudden, the word appears?
 - ii. Or you cannot find something, so you pray, and the place you had just looked suddenly experiences a light shift to reveal that for which you were looking?
 - iii. I cannot tell you how many times I have wrestled with scripture for sermons, bible studies, funerals, weddings, or pastoral counseling and after I have prayed, God reveals to me just what I need.
 - 1. Like today's sermon, I needed inspiration for sharing about Psalm 119 and I looked in this little daily devotional.
 - 2. Wouldn't you know that Psalm 119 is the subject of the devotions starting tomorrow, September 29th, through October 26th?
 - 3. It has gems like this one from October 2nd...
 - a. Open my eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of your law. Psalm 119:18
 - i. When we find ourselves deficient in wisdom, it is not because the Word of God has pages missing, but because we have not seen all there is on the pages we already have. It is not another book we need, but better attention to the book we have; it is not more knowledge we require, but better

vision to see what has already been revealed in Jesus Christ.¹

- e. Psalm 119 is the longest psalm and chapter in the Bible.
 - i. The focus of its 176 verses is God and God's Word.
 - ii. It is an acrostic: an alphabetical tour de force consisting of 22 sections each containing eight poetic lines and each beginning with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet (aleph, bet, gimmel, dalet...etc.)
 - 1. Some scholars believe that 119 was the last psalm at one time as Psalm 1 also upholds the primacy of the Word of God and the psalter bookends the importance of reading God's word.
 - iii. God is mentioned in every verse of this psalm, and the entire psalm speaks of the primacy, authority, sufficiency, efficacy, and encouragement of God's Word in the life of the reader/hearer.
 - iv. It is a personal prayer for help.
 - v. Oppressed and persecuted by powerful enemies who scorned and ridiculed his beliefs in God (vv. 23, 157, 161), the unnamed psalmist found great strength and much comfort by trusting, keeping, and meditating on the Word of God.
- f. Of the four general types of Psalms, Psalm 119 is most often considered a wisdom psalm.
- g. The three remaining types of psalms are praise, laments, and royal psalms:
 - i. Can you guess of the 150 psalms, which of those four categories comprise the largest percentage of the psalter: praise, laments, royal psalms or wisdom psalms?
 - ii. Psalms of praise would seem rather obvious as the Psalter was considered the Israelites' songbook and many of our hymns come from these psalms praising God.

¹ Eugene Peterson. *Praying With the Psalms*. New York: Harper Collins, 1993.

1. Scholars generally agree that 20 psalms can be called Psalms of Praise: (8, 19, 29, 33, 65, 66, 100, 104-5, 111, 113, 114, 117, 135, 136, 145, 146, 148, 149, 150.)
- iii. Surprisingly, or perhaps not so surprisingly when you consider that our natural inclination is to separate ourselves from God and then whine about God not being present in our lives, laments comprise the largest category.
 1. There are about 40 individual laments and at least a dozen national or communal laments.
 - a. The standard format of these psalms includes
 - i. The invocation of God's name
 - ii. A description of present need
 - iii. Prayer for help and deliverance
 - iv. Reasons why God should listen to the one praying
 - v. Vow to offer praise or sacrifice when the petition is heard
 - vi. Grateful praise to God
 - b. A prominent feature is the abrupt shift from all the pleading to the praising, usually in the past tense as the psalmist remembers God's great works in the past.
 - i. Because of that abrupt shift, there are two subcategories to the Lament psalms: Psalms of trust and of thanksgiving.
 - ii. Psalm 23, for example, is considered a trust Psalm in the overall rubric of a Psalm of lament.
- iv. Royal Psalms (144, 18, 21, 118, 101, 2, 21, 45, 110, 72) are those in which the king is the speaker or in which he is the focus of attention.
- v. And finally, wisdom Psalms (1, 34, 37, 49, 112, 128, 32, 73, 111, 127) show their connection with OT wisdom literature by their form and content.

1. Wisdom psalms tend to use the “happy are those who...” construction, the ‘better’ saying, or are an address from a teacher to a pupil or a parent to a child.
 2. Several of the wisdom psalms (34, 37, 111, 112, 119) assume an acrostic pattern, including our Psalm 119 for today.²
5. Kelly is a breast cancer survivor.
- a. When she was recently asked how she beat cancer, she credited reading Lance Armstrong’s biography as having inspired her.
 - i. Even in the midst of treatment, Armstrong continued to successfully train and compete in cycling’s premiere event, the Tour de France.
 - ii. Even though Armstrong ultimately admitted to using performance-enhancing drugs, Kelly says his example and passionate writing encouraged her to keep up her own fight against the deadly disease.
 - b. Just as Lance Armstrong was not perfect, King David in biblical times was not perfect.
 - i. David committed adultery and conspired to have Bathsheba’s husband killed.
 - ii. And yet, David is reputed to have written many of the Psalms.
 - c. God used an imperfect David in biblical times to encourage others.
 - i. God can use an imperfect Lance Armstrong to encourage others in modern times.
 - ii. God can use us all to encourage one another.
6. As we have sung before reading each of our scriptures today, thy word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.
- a. Through God’s word, God wants to bring us light so we need not settle for Christianity-lite.
 - b. Diving into scripture, we can move from the discouraging Murphy’s Law to the encouraging Barnabas Bump.

² Brown, Fitzmyer, Murphy, ed. *The New Jerome Bible Commentary*. (Prentice Hall, NJ, 1990) pp. 525-530.

- c. And if you have ever felt any trepidation about where to start or how one might persevere, let me encourage us all to consider any one of the many Bible studies offered here five days a week.
- d. The more, the merrier: think about the efficacy of groups that tackle intimidating disciplines like running marathons on the Fleet Feet Team, eating healthily through Weight Watchers or avoiding addictive behaviors through Alcoholics Anonymous.
 - i. We know we do things better with the support of small groups.
 - ii. Let us together give ourselves that gift.
 - iii. Just as Psalm 119:103 told us today, together we learn how sweet are God's words to our taste, sweeter than honey to the mouth.
 - 1. What starts as joy will end up as wisdom and result in that history-changing Barnabas Bump.