

Dear Members and Friends of St. John,

I was studying the book of Hebrews the other day, and it struck me how important 'encouragement' was to the early church. The author of Hebrews sent his letter as an *encouragement* (exhortation) to those who were facing a great deal of difficulty (Hebrews 13:22). Early Christians who openly confessed their faith in Jesus were having their property seized by the government, and were physically beaten in public (Heb. 10:32-34). They essentially were turned into paupers overnight, and yet they continued to follow Christ.

Very few of us have seen this kind of persecution. Most of us, however, have at times known hardships: the loss of a job, a serious illness, the death of a loved one, or physical pain. What did we need the most in the midst of our suffering? The answer that I'm going to give you may surprise you. I believe that what we needed the most was encouragement from others. The author of Hebrews writes in Chapter 10, verses 35 and 36: *Therefore do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God you may receive what is promised.* That 'need of endurance'- that remaining connected to our Lord through our times of hardship, is so very important, isn't it? And God uses us to be that encouragement. But how should we encourage others?

The temptation for encouraging others is usually to say things like, "Tough it out, friend," or "I know what you're going through – hang in there." But St. Paul knew what was needed when he wrote in Colossians 3:2: *Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things.* Real encouragement points our friends and loved ones to Christ, and the promise that we have of everlasting life with our Lord in heaven. We remind others of the forgiveness that they have received, no matter what they've done, because of their faith in Jesus. We remember how Christ has promised to never leave us, to always be with us, no matter how difficult times get. We tell them about how Christ suffered on the cross, willingly, so that we could have eternal life. If you're providing encouragement to a non-Christian, it's even more crucial that you share your faith with them. We also pray with our friends and loved ones, asking our Lord to continue to provide encouragement through His gracious Word.

Finally, it may not seem possible, but many Christians provide the best encouragement to others in the midst of *their own* suffering. *How* we suffer can be a great help to those around us. When we have peace in the midst of great trouble, we need to share that with others. When we have great joy when everything is coming apart around us, we need to tell others about that joy. These very real blessings are a gift from our heavenly Father, and come from the Holy Spirit that dwells within us. No matter what your situation is today, ask your Lord and Savior to help you be an encouragement to someone else. Ask Him to do this each day, and see what happens! In Jesus name, amen.

Pastor Travis