

Are You an Encourager?

Romans 12:8a

Sermon Transcript by Reverend Ernest O'Neill

Once you have established by intelligent examination of the documents behind this dear Book [the Bible] that it is reliable history. Also, once you have established by analysis of Jesus' life and character that he must be the Son of our Creator, then all his words about life and all the words of his trusted followers about life become an absolute truth for you and become the central guide for living your life here on earth. That is why, loved ones, for eleven years now many of us have been studying a book in this Bible called Romans. We believe it is the best guide we have for living our lives here on earth and the best explanation of reality and why we are here.

In this book of Romans, our Creator has told us that every one of us has a certain gift that he has given us to enable us to help each other. Some gifts are very obvious. Some of us have a gift of a beautiful voice or for playing a musical instrument; some of us have a gift for putting other people at ease. Others of us have just an incomprehensible ability to do at a certain time something that neither we nor anybody else can do for anyone again. That is a gift, too. Every one of us has such a gift. In other words, the reason our Creator has put us here is so that we would actually do what he wanted us to do, using these gifts that he has given us.

Now I think it is easy for us to say, "Well, I accept the theory, but I'm not conscious that I have any gift myself." Actually, that is the characteristic of a gift, isn't it? Pavarotti just sings. He does what comes naturally. The remarkable effect is noticed by other people, but he just does what comes naturally. That is what a gift is. It is something that you are not conscious of or aware of. Mother Theresa is not conscious that she has a gift, but as she does what comes naturally, the effects of what God has given to her are obvious to the rest of us.

Loved ones, it is the same with you and me. It doesn't matter if you are sitting there and saying, "I'm virtually a nonentity, you know. I really am! I don't really think that I have a gift." That is the way I felt, too. I think we all feel that way. A gift is something that we are not conscious of. It is more obvious in its effects on other people than it is in our own self-consciousness. Loved ones, I ask you to do what I'm doing myself and what most of us are doing that believe this. Believe what God has said, that he has actually given you a gift and as you do what comes naturally, that gift will begin to be manifest.

That is what you find in Romans 12:6: "Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them." Do what comes naturally and God will manifest the gift that he has given to you to others. You might never know. I have met dear old saints who were the most surprised people when somebody would comment about a certain gift they had, and they would have been exercising it for fifty years. That is the beauty of God's plan.

Now what I would ask you to do with me this morning is to study the next gift that God mentions in Romans 12: 8, "He who exhorts, in his exhortation." I would ask us all to sit before God and let him teach us what that gift is. Maybe first by showing us the misconceptions of it, because some of us rub our hands and say, "Exhortation, that is my gift!" We look out on the rest of the world and say, "The whole human race, except me, is a wishy-washy, weak-willed, fainthearted, half-dead lot, and what they need is a good dose of exhortation every other week. I, fortunately, am willing to give it

to them." So we kind of go at it!

We feel that is exhortation. We picture exhortation as something like General Patton or General Custer lashing the whip over the heads of the huskies and telling them to get up off their bottoms and pull that sled until their hearts break. Or we think of it as John Wayne saying, "Let's move 'em out!" We think, "That's what I'm fixed and fitted to do; I can exhort people." So we kind of exhort people. We see it as a strange combination of criticism of them and partially of beating them over the head and trying to prompt them to some action, any action as long as it is action.

Of course the result of that kind of exhortation is just lamentable. You know how it goes. "Why don't you get up like everybody else in the morning and get going?"

That is our bit of exhortation. "By now other wives would have the laundry done, the house cleaned and chicken cordon bleu and candlelight ready on the table for me." Or "Other sons would have had the snow cleared and the garbage out and would be offering to help with the dishes." Or "Let's get up and get out there and knock on doors and invite people in to hear God's Word." The effect of that kind of exhortation on the poor victim is always the same, isn't it? The poor guy or girl just feels tired. If you were down before they started to exhort you, you are certainly down and out after they have finished. If you felt a little inadequate for things, you certainly feel good for nothing after they have finished with you. You feel discouraged, depressed and disheartened.

Now loved ones, thank God, exhortation has nothing to do with that at all. Exhortation is not standing off from some friend or husband or wife or daughter or son or colleague and whipping them from a distance and externally trying to lash them into action. Exhortation is utterly different from that.

Do you know where the word "exhort" comes from? Our English language is a combination of many different languages. It is Anglo-Saxon, Latin, Greek, French and then the Scandinavian languages as well. The word "exhort" comes from a Latin verb 'hortari' and means "to encourage". Do you know where the English word "encourage" comes from? "Coeur" is "heart" in French.

And so "encourage" is to "hearten" a person, or to put heart into a person. That is the basic meaning of "to exhort" a person. It means to encourage them, or to put heart into them. Far from being something you do from outside them, it is something you do inside them. It is putting yourself in their shoes, putting yourself into their heart, getting inside their heart and giving it strength and a lift and helping them to rise up.

It comes out even more clearly in the Greek Testament when you look at the word Paul used when he wrote to the Romans. The word that we translate "exhort" is the word parakaleo. The noun is parakleseis and sometimes is translated directly "the Paraclete." You know that Jesus said, "I will send the Paraclete to you." That is, "I will send the Holy Spirit to you. I will not leave you on your own. I will send you a Person who will be to you what I have been here in my physical body except that he will be that inside your own heart. I'll send you someone who will be to you what I have been."

That is what the Holy Spirit is, and that actually is underneath the meaning of the word parakaleo. It is someone who comes inside you. If you look up the word parakaleo you find in kaleo the "k" becomes a "c" and the "l" doubles and it becomes the English word "call". Para you can guess from "parallel" lines--two lines running alongside each other. So parakaleo is "to call alongside another

person"--to come alongside another person and to call up on their behalf, to entreat on their behalf, to beseech on their behalf. One who exhorts is one who comes alongside another person, right into their very shoes, right into their heart, and then speaks up helping their voice to call up and to see things as they really are.

There is a very touching piece by Anthony Trollope, a well-known English novelist [1815-1882]. He has a beautiful scene where a girl wants to marry a certain guy. Of course, her mother will have nothing to do with it; she thinks he is the wrong guy completely. The girl loves the mother very much. They have lived together for years since the father died. The mother says, "No, he is not the one for you", but the girl is honestly serious about the guy. After a long conversation where it goes "I think, mother, he is really the one for me" and the mother saying, "No, he will destroy your life", the girl says, "Mother, if you can see with my eyes and hear with my ears and feel with my heart, you can ask me to judge with your judgment." I think it is so good, because not only moms and dads but those of us who are so bent on exhorting each other are so poor at that.

An exhorter is one who sees with the other person's eyes, hears with the other person's ears, feels with the other person's heart and yet gets inside them and helps to lift them up and helps them to see things as they really are and to see themselves as they really are.

Loved ones, that is what most of us need. Some of us could do with a kick, but really, love would do just as well. Most of us really do need somebody to come alongside us lovingly and to see with our eyes and to hear with our ears and yet to lend us the ability of their faith to see how we really are and where we really are.

Now where are we? A loved one who is uncertain about something, who doesn't know quite which way to turn, or who is really just at a standstill in their life, that person needs to see where they really are. Where are they? Where are all of us? I will tell you. All of us are actually dead with Christ. That is truth. The Bible says, "Christ died for all, therefore all died."

All of us are really dead with Christ. But the loved one who is feeling that they can't do what they need to do in this life, or, the loved one who is just bewildered about what to do, they don't really think that. They think that they, with all their twisted-up-ness and all their impossible feelings, that they are very much alive. They don't think that that is dead with Christ. If you say to me, "Oh well, is that all we are--dead with Christ?" No, because the Bible says "For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we have been resurrected with him in a resurrection like his." [Romans 6:5] So we all have actually been raised in Jesus.

If you say, "Well, where is that?" Jesus has been raised to the right hand of the Father. The Bible says, "God has raised us up who were dead and has made us sit with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus." A loved one who is down and who can't see the way through needs somebody who believes that and who can get alongside them and stir up and strengthen their faith to believe that too. That is what we need.

We don't need to be beaten over the head; we don't need to be preached to; we don't need to be yelled at or bawled out; we need some loved ones who can see that we have been crucified and raised with Jesus, that all our old inadequate self has been destroyed and replaced by the full completeness and ability of Jesus Himself, and that that is where we are--at the source of all power in the universe. We need somebody to help us do that.

Do you know that that is when healing takes place? That is what is involved in healing by faith. It is not all the shaking of people, yelling at them or casting out the demon. It is building up. You notice how Jesus did it? He built up the faith of the person until they really did believe that they actually had been crucified with Christ before the foundation of the world and had been raised and at this moment were at God's right hand and all power was available to them. That is what exhortation is, loved ones.

Some of us are facing intractable circumstances that we cannot move--a combination of people, money, jobs, and pressures that we cannot break our way through--and we are beating our head against it. We need to see that not only the old self was crucified with Christ, but what Paul says in Galatians--the world was crucified with Christ. "I was crucified to the world and the world was crucified to me."

The truth is that that set of intractable circumstances was part of that fallen world's rebellion against God and the result was the separation of the standing in relationship to God. Those circumstances actually were destroyed in Jesus. "The world" stands for the world-system, and the world-system of intractable circumstances that surround your life was placed by God into His Son Jesus and killed right there and destroyed, and it was raised up a new world that works according to His will.

That was what happened with the walls of Jericho. In the world that has been unresurrected in Jesus, the walls are strong as anything, and you couldn't move them. But in the world that has been resurrected in Jesus, those walls were down from before the foundation of the world. God saw that they would have to go down. All those dear guys did was circle it seven times, and by their faith--believing that that had all been already done--they enabled God to actualize it here in the protons and neutrons of this world.

That is what happens with us. Your circumstances that are so impossible were destroyed by God in his Son and resurrected new and workable and flexible before the foundation of the world. God foresaw those things; God foresaw the debt that you can't pay; God foresaw the job that you can't get; God foresaw the person you are in tension with. God foresaw that and he put the guts of that, the essence of that, into his Son and destroyed it in Jesus.

There is a verse in Galatians that says God nailed those principalities and powers to the cross. He nailed the powers that make those things so impossible to the cross. What most of us need is somebody to come alongside us and see that that is true, to believe that and help us to begin to believe it. Loved ones, the moment your faith begins to grasp that, that moment the power of that cross and resurrection begins to work in your circumstances. That is why miracles take place. Do you see that? It is not breaking of law; it is an introduction of a new set of laws that come in the resurrection life that exists in the risen Christ. There is this set of laws that we follow down here, of the fallen world. God enables the higher set of laws to operate the moment one of you has faith, the moment you believe that what he said is true.

Loved ones, an exhorter is one who comes alongside a dear one who is depressed beyond tears, who is despairing beyond despair. The exhorter comes alongside and feels completely what they feel and yet knows that they have been raised up and their circumstances have already been destroyed and rectified in Jesus and who begins to build up their faith so that they can see that too. An exhorter is actually a spy who works from inside, a dear friend who comes inside you and enables you to stand up and see things as they really are.

Loved ones, we all need exhorters. Many of us need to do what Abraham did. Remember he did not consider the age of Sarah's womb; he did not consider that he was as good as dead himself. He was fully persuaded that God was able to do what he had promised and to enable his wife Sarah to bear a child even though she was over eighty years of age. That is why we need exhorters. So if you feel you could do a little exhorting, I would encourage you to do it, because most of us could do with it. We could do with help like that.

Let us pray.

Dear Lord, we have had difficulty understanding miracles. It has been difficult to see why situations like the wall of Jericho would come down, or why some people are healed of cancer and some aren't. Lord, we do begin to glimpse that you have actually raised this whole world up by destroying it all in Jesus and you have raised it all up and made it new. We glimpse to see that the real and perfect world is right alongside this imperfect world we see and touch. We can tap into that perfect world in a moment by faith. Lord, we thank you for that.

Then, Lord, we thank you it is up to you because you have the right to bring that perfect world to earth in whatever way you please, so that you take Roger to be with yourself and give him a whole new body. And you heal Barb her on earth of the cancer. Lord, you have the right to decide. Lord, I don't think we are worried about that. We are happy that you should decide which. We see that we need to escape from the limitations of our own strength which we see as so inadequate and weak. We need to begin to see that we have been raised up in Christ and placed at your right hand where there is no good thing which you will withhold from us. You have already removed every obstacle and our place is to see that by faith and acceptance and let the results follow.

Lord, we pray that you will not only allow us to do that in our own lives but enable us this coming week to be good exhorters. Enable us to be people who will call out on behalf of our friend -- who put heart into our friends, who hearten them, encourage them and build them up so that they are also to exercise faith also for victory.

Now the grace of our Lord Jesus, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us throughout this week. Amen.