Strengthening the Church of God

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Macedonia. Paul had spent some time planting churches in Macedonia, specifically in Philippi, in Thessalonica and Lonaica and Berea. And now as he's moving towards Jerusalem, he goes back to these places. And what did he do? Look at verse 2.
When he had gone through these paths and had given them much encouragement, he came to Greece. In Ephesus, he exalts and encourages the people of God. In the churches in Macedonia, he spent some time encouraging them.
[5:54] Paul did not encourage them with a few words. The Bible says he encouraged them with much encouragement. In other words, with many words, Paul encouraged the Christians in Philippi, Thessalonica and Berea.

Now it is obviously clear that Paul's desire and tendency to encourage the people of God partly explains the incident in Troas.

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In verse 7, we are told that Paul arrives in Troas, where he spent seven days. On the first day of the week, when they were gathered together to break bread, Paul talked with them, intending to depart on the morrow.
And he prolonged his speech until midnight. Paul was intense. He was concerned about the spiritual growth and maturity of these believers.
He was concerned about everything that's happening in their lives that would affect their spiritual lives. And the Bible says he spent a long time from sunset to midnight, talking to them.
[7:14] In fact, literally, it says he talked on and on. And as Paul was talking to them on and on, prolonging his speech, a teenager named Eutychus, who refused to sit in the pews, was sitting in the window, was sleepy.

That's fairly understandable. He was very sleepy. And he fell off the window from the third floor and died.
And Paul goes down, he lifts his preaching, goes down, embraces him. And by the power of God, life was put back into him.
And after that, everyone stayed awake. That's not a valid threat, but it's a joke.
Well, everyone stayed awake. And they had Holy Communion. And then he continued preaching till daybreak. So if you want an outline of that service, it started with the preaching of the gospel from sunset to midnight.
[8:31] There was an accident. Somebody died. And there was a miracle. The power of God through Paul raised Eutychus from death. They had Holy Communion.

And Paul continued his sermon from midnight to sunrise. How about that at St. John's? Now, one of the questions that we have to deal with here in this passage is this.
Why did Eutychus fall off? Was it because Paul's sermon was long-winded? Many commentators believe that was the case.
It was because Paul talked on and on and just kept on and on. The young lad was bored and he fell off and died. So it was Paul's fault.
But the fact of the matter is that in verses 7 and 9, the words used for Paul's preaching is the word translated dialogue.
[9:30] In verses 7 and 9, the word is dialogue. In other words, Paul was not just speaking to them. Paul was having a conversation with them from sunset to midnight.

It was highly interactive. And it could not have been that boring. Paul interacted with them, listened to them, they asked him questions.
And he encouraged them as he spoke to them. So it was not because Paul was long-winded and having a long sermon that Eutychus fell. In fact, it was after the death and raising of Eutychus that Paul the apostle embarked on a long, long, earnest sermon.
Because in verse 11, the word that is translated conversation is the word translated homily. And if you've been an Anglican for a long time, you know that homily has to do with a short, moralistic talk. But in the time that this word was used, homily meant a long, earnest talk. So the sermon was actually long and Paul kept preaching till sunrise.
[10:48] And of course, the answer to the question as to why Eutychus fell was because he was tired. And partly also because of the fumes coming from the lamps.

That's the point of verse 8. There were many lights in the upper chamber where we were gathered. The fumes coming from the lamps in those days had sedative effect.
So coupled with the tiredness of Eutychus and the fumes coming from the lamps, Eutychus fell off from the third floor. And we are back to the fundamental question.
What is the point of the story? Well, I've heard that the point of this story is that if you slip off during a sermon, God's judgment might come upon you.
You know, you might slip off and never wake up forever. That's not the point of the sermon. That's not the point of the story. I've also heard that the point of the story is that preachers should not preach long sermons.
[11:56] I see many people nodding. Well, that's not the point of the story. Actually, there's nothing in the Bible that stops you from preaching for three hours. And is the point of the story saying that you should preach long sermons?

Absolutely not. It's still not the point of the story. The point of the story has to do with the fact that Paul's love and Paul's desire for the strengthening of these believers was so strong that Paul was

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willing to speak as long as it was possible in order to encourage these believers.
Paul loved them. Paul loved them. He wanted them to grow and be strong in their faith. And if he took answering their questions from sunset to midnight and having a long, earnest sermon from midnight to sunrise, Paul was going to do that.
He was a man totally, completely committed to the life of the people of God. He was a great encourager. And it's very interesting that the Greek word that's used for encouragement in verse 2 is the word paraklysis.
And the word paraklysis was often used in ancient times to describe the speeches given to soldiers before they went into battle.
[13:27] Paraklysis was a word also used to describe the speech given to sailors before they left to sail the high seas.

The ministry of paraklysis, the ministry of encouragement, is the ministry that inspires courage, is the ministry that inspires hope, it is the ministry that inspires renewal of spirit in the lives of those who are facing danger and trouble and difficulty in their lives.
Someone has described this ministry of encouragement, ministry of paraklysis, as a set of jumper cables. In the winter, when it's very cold, we carry jumper cables.
And when your car battery dies out, you plug it into another source of power, and you have a transfusion of power. The ministry of encouragement that God has given to us is a ministry under God, by the Spirit of God, and through the Word of God, through which we transfuse power into the lives of other people.
Many of us in this congregation, if not all of us, need encouragement. You and I face the battles of life in our Christian life.
[14:53] We face the battles of life, spiritual battles, in our homes. We face spiritual battles everywhere we go. Life is a life in which we encounter all kinds of opposition and difficulty.

The Christian life can also be described as sailing in treacherous waters. And that's the whole idea of the Anglican worship space, where this is called the nave.
And it has to do with a ship sailing in the waters. The waters are treacherous, and we are tempted to sink into discouragement and frustration.
We are tempted to despair and run away from the battle. And this is why you and I need to be encouraged.
I, in my own personal life, and in my family, together as a family, we face spiritual crisis every now and then. We face marital crisis every now and then.
[16:00] We are as human as all of you here. And I don't think there is a huge difference between what is happening in my personal life and in my marriage life, and how that impacts my spiritual life.

Sometimes it's easy to say, this is your life. And this is your other life. And so we compartmentalize and departmentalize life.
But what happens in my personal life, what happens in my marriage, affects my spiritual life. And it is important for us that as we encounter one another, and look at the things that are happening outside of the so-called spiritual life, we need to understand that it affects our spiritual lives as well.
Some of you here are facing career crisis. You are facing problems with your family, with children, who do not follow the faith that you believe in.
And there is no need to pretend. There is no need to follow the philosophy that says, I am okay, and you are okay.
[17:14] Because the truth of the matter is that I am not okay, and neither are you. We are a people who face uncertainty in our lives.

And you and I face temptations and moral failures in our own lives. I have been around St. John's for a while. I have been with staff. And I have met with many of you here in this congregation.
I am yet to meet anybody, whether it is on staff or outside of staff in this congregation, who no longer faces temptations and moral failures.
If you are one, I would like to meet you in the Nathex after the service. We are all in this together.
Those of you who are Presbyterians will remember Samuel Rutherford.
Samuel Rutherford was a great Scottish Presbyterian. And this is what he wrote. He said, I thought it had been an easy thing to be a Christian.
[18:20] And that to seek God had been at the next door. But oh, the wanderings, the turnings, the ups and downs that God has led me through.

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That's what Christian life is about. There are wanderings, there are turnings, there are ups and downs, and God leads us through all of this.
We are all going through them in one way or the other in our personal lives. And how do we as a congregation, therefore carry out the ministry of paraklesis?
How do we carry out the ministry of encouragement that's absolutely necessary for growth in spiritual life and our lives together as a community?
The fundamental way in which we do this is through the Word of God. John's thought says, Nothing encourages and strengthens the people of God like the Word of God.
[19:27] When Jesus was speaking to his disciples, he said to them, The words I speak to you, they are spirit and they are life. The Word of God is spirit, it renews our spirit, and the Word of God renews life and gives us life.

God's Word is God's agent of transformation and renewal. God's Word, by the power of his spirit, is the agent of empowerment and instilling of confidence and hope in the midst of trouble and chaos. God's Word, by the power of his spirit, is the purpose of the world. God's presence. God's presence. You and I can encourage and strengthen one another as we share the Word of God with each other, as we remind one another of the promises of God.
That in the midst of the uncertainties of life, in the midst of the troubles of life, in the midst of the confusion, and in the midst of the treacherous waters, we can say to one another, in accordance with the Word of God, God is alive and God is involved in your own life.
When you and I face moral failure, God's Word speaks to that.
[20:39] And what the Word of God says to you and to me is that Jesus died on the cross, and on the third day he rose again. And because he died on the cross and rose again on the third day, there is absolutely nothing that happens in your life that God cannot deal with.

The Bible says, though your sins are as red as scarlet, they shall be made as white as snow, because of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.
And this is the kind of word of encouragement that we can speak to one another in the midst of the reality of our human frailty. God is alive.
Jesus is risen from the dead. The blood of the cross has been shed for you and for me. And there is forgiveness and there is hope for everyone seated here this morning. The second way that we encourage one another to carry out our ministry is through prayer.
Praying for one another and letting them know that you are praying for them. I have been wonderfully encouraged when people say to me, we are praying for you as members of staff.
[21:51] And we are praying for you directly as well. Once a month we get together to pray for one another. At our staff meetings we pray for you as a congregation. And I know that many of you pray for us.

And I want to thank you for that. And let us know that you are praying for us. We need the prayers. There is nobody on staff who has got to the point where they don't need any more prayers.
We need your prayers and you need to pray for one another. The third way that we can show our encouragement is being emotionally present as well as physically present with people.
Have you noticed when people ask you, how are you doing? And you look at them, they are not really there. They are not waiting for the answer. Is that your experience?
I see it every week. It happens to me every week. How are you? And you want to tell them how you are. They are not listening. And even if you tell them, they change the topic.
[22:53] So what is the point of the question? That should not happen in the Church of Christ. The ministry of Paraclases is a ministry of physical presence, is a ministry of emotional presence.

It is a ministry of listening and hearing what is happening in the lives of people. And sometimes we may not have anything to say. I have read some books on counseling and everything.
But I tell you, there are things that I see happening in the lives of people and in my own life that I do not know what to say. And it is fine. And those are the times that we communicate to the people or to the person that I hear you.
I am emotionally present with you. And I am going to pray about it. That is a way of showing the ministry of Paraclases.
And this is partly why this morning we are going to commission Stephen ministers who have been trained and set apart to carry out in a specialized way this ministry of Paraclases.

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[24:04] But that does not mean that you and I cannot carry out this ministry. Because the Holy Spirit is present in the Church. God has given us His Word. And God has given us one another.

And we cannot listen. We cannot care. It is absolutely possible. And I want to challenge you this morning to try it. Just try and listen. And pray. And God will guide you in the process of this ministry of Paraclases.
Finally, Paul was not only involved in speaking the words of encouragement alone. He was also very practical in this ministry of Paraclases.
What I have learned in my own life and in the lives of other people is that people can grow through hearing the Word of God. But they can also grow and be strengthened in their faith when we reach out to them in a practical way.
It is a dangerous temptation to hide behind words and not do anything. The epistles of John and James warn against faith and words without action.
[25:13] The ministry of encouragement is a ministry that involves words and involves action. And that is the point of verse 4. Acts 20 verse 4. Sopata of Berea, the son of Pyrrhus, accompanied Paul, and of the Thessalonians Aristarchus and Secandus, and Gels of Debi and Timothy, and the Asians Tychicus and Trophimus.

These went on and were waiting for us at Troas.
The point of those verses is that these seven men who accompanied Paul were representatives from the churches that Paul had planted. And they were traveling with Paul in order to strengthen the believers in Jerusalem with gifts of money.
They were taking a collection to the Jerusalem church. And so for Paul, the ministry of encouragement was a ministry of speaking the Word of God, of praying and caring for people, and being present with them, as well as physical, material acts of generosity and kindness.
I have seen many people, young Christians, old Christians, middle-aged Christians, all kinds of Christians, encouraged by the practical things that are done for them.
[26:42] I want you to look around you this morning. This congregation is a congregation full of people, full of ministers who need to be strengthened, who need to be encouraged in their faith and in the realities of their own lives.

And the reason is obvious. We all need to grow in our faith. We are hurting. We are hurting. We are feeling lonely. Many of us are struggling in our faith.
We are carrying heavy burdens that for a long time we have not been able to deal with. And God's intention is not for us to struggle alone. His plan is that we struggle together.
And that is why He has given us each other in order to build one another up and in order to encourage one another.
And I believe you can do it. And therefore, I ask you this morning to prayerfully reach out to one another. And that is the way community is built.
[27:53] And this is the way we strengthen one another. As we speak the words of God. As we pray for one another. As we are emotionally present and physically present.

And as we act practically God's word with generosity to other people. And may God enable us together to encourage and build up one another.
Amen. Thanks. You willestven. We will please ask for one another. Amen. That address is www.stjohns.org .org On the website you will also find information about ministries, worship services, and special events at St. John's Shaughnessy.
We hope that this message has helped you and that you will share it with others. Thank you.

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